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THE TRANSACTIONS OF LORD LOUIS LEWIS

ROLAND PERTWEE

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He held up the plate for her inspection, at the same time asking whether she had ever seen it before. (Page 20)

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THE TRANSACTIONS OF LORD LOUIS LEWIS

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TO
A. P. AND C. B.

FOREWORD

IN introducing the Transactions of Lord Louis Lewis to the public, I offer, at the same time, an apology for having departed from the accepted form of the average novel.

The reader will find herein no continuous plot to carry him along from the first to the last page; for the doings of Lord Louis Lewis were many and various, and each one is complete unto itself.

There is a popular prejudice against episodic literature. Why this should be is hard to understand, since the lives of most of us are not bound up in the events of a single issue, but composed rather of a mosaic of incidents and emotions, the pattern of which is for ever changing.

The aforesaid average novel offers to the reader but one complete story, whereas the Transactions of Lord Louis Lewis offer, at the least, nine, and then the hero is left in a position to engage upon many more, should occasion offer.

I am not at all sure Lord Louis would approve of being apologized for. In all the many episodes of his chequered career one searches in vain for a *lèse majesté* which would, in any sense, call for an apology. A distinguished ornament to the aristocracy he

is, and a man ever to be relied upon to do the right thing at the right time.

A brief anecdote of two Famille Verte plates, for the possession of which he outbid the famous Mr. Salting, will support the above claim.

Lord Louis was inordinately proud of these plates, and ranked them among his chief treasures. This fact makes his conduct in relation to their sad finish the more praiseworthy.

He had given a dinner-party, attended by the local mayor and his wife. His dinner-parties were always charming, and, on this occasion, he had conceived the idea of serving to each guest, at dessert, a priceless Oriental plate. These were not of one service, you understand; indeed, with the exception of the Famille Verte pair, no two were alike.

One of the Famille Verte plates went to the mayoress, the other to himself.

Unhappily, the mayoress was a lady who had never digested the axiom that one should not "point one's conversation with the table implements, withal."

She was illustrating a story with the aid of her fruit knife, and when she came to the point (of the story) she struck her plate a sharp and ringing blow.

It is needless to observe, that after this, Lord Louis' was the only remaining one of the original pair.

The excellent lady was in a distressing flutter at the havoc she had wrought. She was certain the plate was worth hundreds. She had never been so upset before!

Lord Louis, who had not shown the smallest emotion, almost wished that words would fail her, but in this he was disappointed.

"Please, do not disturb yourself," he begged. "You have done me a great service, for I never liked these plates. I kept them because they were a pair; but, happily, that reason no longer remains. With your permission we will destroy the survivor," and he broke his own plate in several pieces.

If the above story meets with your approval I have little doubt that the Transactions of Lord Louis Lewis will win likewise a larger measure.

ROLAND PERTWEE.

"Torcross."
1916.

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LORD LOUIS LEWIS

LORD LOUIS LEWIS

CHAPTER I

EGGSHELL

THERE is no gainsaying the fact that Simon Caleb, dealer in curios and porcelain, of the city of Bristol, was a very unpopular man. His business methods were unscrupulous and freely condemned by his fellow craftsmen. His unpopularity was heightened by the fact that he was uncommonly lucky in the purchases he made and their subsequent marketing.

Thus, when it became known that Simon had bought a ruby-back eggshell plate of the very finest quality and decoration, and had bought it from an aged cottager for the price of sixpence, public opinion ran very high indeed. Sympathy for the cottager was to be heard on every side, and the number of dealers who called at Simon's shop to find out the old lady's address was quite remarkable.

Simon, however, preserved a characteristic reticence on the point, and their solicitations came to naught.

The one person who succeeded in ascertaining it was Mr. Palliser, of Palliser and Tonge, and the knowledge came to him without resorting to Simon's

premises. Mr. Palliser lost no time in paying a call on the bed-ridden old lady, and brightened up her declining days by describing to what extent she had been imposed upon. He even went so far as to intimate a willingness to buy any similar trifle she might possess at its true value — namely, half-a-crown.

But Simon had looked to it that nothing had escaped his vigilant eye; and, beyond an old lustre teapot with a broken spout, a moustache cup bearing a picture of the pier at Weston-Super-Mare, and an assortment of cheap blue landscape plates from a neighbouring oil shop, nothing of interest remained.

Mr. Palliser hid his disappointment as best he might, and, deprecating the idea of depriving her of the moustache cup, asked the origin of the eggshell plate.

The invalid's mind was not very clear on the subject, but she hazarded the belief that her niece had acquired it when she was in service. When or how this had come to pass she was unable to answer; and, the niece being dead, Palliser's chances of discovering the plate's antecedents were fairly remote. Consequently he retired, without even so much as wishing his hostess a speedy recovery.

Having been commissioned to buy eggshell porcelain for Lord Louis Lewis, the eminent connoisseur, Mr. Palliser was not unnaturally aggrieved that this specimen should have escaped him.

He thereupon conceived the plan to induce Simon

Caleb to form a partnership with him for the purpose of negotiating the plate to their mutual advantage. With this in view, he called on Simon and asked permission to examine the plate.

"What for?" asked Simon.

"If it's genuine I might find you a customer," he said.

"I can find all the customers I want without any help from you," was the rejoinder.

However, he produced the plate, and Palliser purred his admiration over it.

"Remarkable," he said, "quite remarkable. The odd thing is, that I've got a plate at home which is the dead spit of this one, though mine isn't genuine. One of those French imitations, y'know. How much are you goin' to ask for this?"

"Four hundred pounds."

"I doubt if it's worth that," said Palliser.

"I shall keep it till I get my price," said Caleb.

"You'll keep it for ever then," replied Palliser.

"Will I?" said Simon. "Lord Louis would buy it like a shot."

Palliser frowned.

"Lord Louis on'y buys through me," he said.

"Dessay he'd make an exception if he saw this," said Caleb.

"He wouldn't," said Palliser. "I've got a tight contract with him. It 'ud be worth your while to let me have it for a couple of hundred."

Simon Caleb extended a hand.

"You are out of this deal," he said. "I only

showed it you to make your mouth water. Besides, where'd you raise a couple of hundred, I should like to know? I was told the Official Receiver was in at your place."

"Who said so?" asked Palliser quickly.

"Never you mind. Hand me back the plate."

Palliser backed a pace.

"You won't let me into the deal then?" he said.

"No," said Simon emphatically. "What's the good of sharing profits when you can get them all?"

"A pity!" said Palliser. "A great pity!"

Then, for a man who was presumably accustomed to the handling of delicate ware, Mr. Palliser did a strange thing. He dropped the eggshell plate; and, so that there should be no doubt whatsoever as to the result, he dropped it upon a slab of green malachite marble reposing conveniently on the floor of the shop.

One of the peculiarities of eggshell china is its inability to withstand the shock of a fall and at the same time preserve its original outlines. What a moment before had been a single piece of rare quality, now, by the process of contact, had become a matter of sixty fragments of varying shapes and sizes. To a devotee of jig-saw puzzles the task of reuniting these would have proved of exceptional interest.

One would imagine that the loss of such an *objet d'art* would have excited the cultured gentry to a pinnacle of emotion. This, however, was not the case. From an æsthetic point of view neither was in the least moved, the truth being that their admiration

for a thing of beauty was measured entirely by its marketable value. Palliser was the first to break the silence.

"My!" he said. "However did I come to do that?"

"On purpose," said Simon, and reached across for an invoice form.

"What are you goin' to do?" asked Palliser.

"Make you out a bill for four hundred pounds," replied Caleb, wiping his pen on the inside of his sleeve.

"I haven't got any money," said Palliser. "I'm on the verge of bankruptcy. You wouldn't realize sixpence in the pound."

Simon regarded him through narrowing lids.

"Palliser," he said, "you're a dirty rat!—a dirty dog in the manger!"

"You'd never have got four hundred for it," said Palliser, irrelevantly. "But there's no reason why we shouldn't both make a bit now."

Simon Caleb picked up a heavily-carved Maori whip handle and emerged from behind the counter to do violence against the person of Mr. Palliser.

"Don't be a fool," said Palliser, backing towards the door. "Don't be a fool! I have the very best reason for breaking that plate."

"I've got a better one for breaking your head," said Simon; and he made a sweep with his weapon, greatly imperilling the safety of an Oriental bowl in the near vicinity.

Palliser realized that his bodily safety was by no

means assured. Being a man of resource, he threw his arms about a tall glass case in which the rarer specimens of Simon's porcelain were exhibited.

"Touch me," said he, "and I'll push the lot over."

Simon hesitated. He knew that Palliser would not have any scruple about committing this further depredation; and, much as he desired to strike a blow, the contents of the glass case represented a great deal of invested capital. Its journey to the floor would inevitably result in a severe financial loss. Moreover, he was uncertain how far the law would support his act of violence.

Palliser, as a keen psychologist, followed to a nicety the workings of his adversary's mind. He also appreciated the value of his present tenure, and determined not to relax his hold until a satisfactory understanding had been reached.

"Why did you drop the plate?" asked Simon impotently.

"Business," Palliser replied. "Business! Even at Christie's it would never have fetched two hundred."

"Lord Louis would have paid four and been glad to," said Simon.

"Even if he had," returned Palliser, "you'd have only got half. He's a funny chap, Lord Louis is; always insists on the original owner sharing the profits when a thing's been bought cheap. You'd have had to parker up a full half to that precious old lady you swindled."

Simon Caleb smiled.

"D'you think I'd have been such a fool as to let him know where it came from?" he asked.

"Well, if you hadn't I should," said Palliser. "So two hundred is the outside you'd have touched. Now, if you let me into the deal we can do very nicely for ourselves."

"Why didn't you say so before," wailed Simon, "instead of breaking the thing like a dam' fool?"

"It'll be worth more to us broken than whole."

"Us!" said Simon quickly .

"Us," repeated Palliser. "We'll form a nice, quiet little partnership and divide all profits."

"I bought the plate and it belongs to me," said Simon.

"Very well," returned Palliser with dignity. "You stick the bits together and sell it for what you can get. You ought to make a hundred per cent. on the sixpence you laid out."

Simon bit his lower lip thoughtfully. He turned and regarded the broken pieces which littered the floor.

"It's a bargain," he said. "Give me threepence for half I paid and let's hear what you got to say."

Palliser released his hold on the glass case and stepped boldly into the open.

"Now you're talkin'," he said. "Shall we step into the parlour and discuss it quiet over a glass of whiskey? We'd best pick up those bits first though."

When all the pieces had been collected and placed in a quarto envelope, Simon led the way to the dusty little parlour behind the shop.

"First of all," said Palliser, drawing a chair near the fire, "here's my threepence."

Simon transferred the coins to his own pocket while Palliser helped himself to a whiskey and water.

"Now for it," he said.

The outline of the plan Palliser proceeded to sketch was remarkable at once for its simplicity, neatness and entire lack of moral scruple.

Briefly, it was as follows: As previously stated, Palliser possessed an imitation eggshell plate similar to, but not identical with, the one whose destruction he had encompassed. Viewed in a half light, by a short-sighted person, the substitute might well be mistaken for the genuine. On these conditions the success of the scheme was hinged.

Lord Louis Lewis, though an excellent connoisseur, was unhappily afflicted with very indifferent vision. True, this defect was easily corrected by the use of glasses; but these glasses were of a variety which detracted in no small measure from the appearance of the wearer. On this point Lord Louis was sensitive, and only wore them when actually necessary. Thus, should an object be unexpectedly thrust into his hands, one could reasonably rely on a certain lapse of time before his lordship would be in a position to bring to bear his critical faculties.

"What's all this leading up to?" demanded Simon.

"This," replied Palliser. "I'll go and see Lord Louis, tell him you've got a bit of ruby-back eggshell for which you are asking five hundred."

"Five hundred!"

"That's it," said Palliser. "Then I'll bring him along to have a look at it after tea—twilight. D'y' see? Before he's got his glasses on you'll give 'im the plate—my plate. On the under side of it we'll have fixed a bit of fine silk, the other end of which you'll hold. While his lordship is fumbling for his specs you'll give the silk a pull — and down come the plate! Do it neat and he'll never know it wasn't his own fault."

Simon glared.

"What game?" he asked. "You've on'y got one idea — to break everything."

"When a man breaks a thing," said Palliser, "it's up to 'im to buy it — that is, of course," he added hurrriedly, "if he has the cash."

"Palliser," said Simon, "you are a fool. D'you think Lord Louis 'ud pay five hundred for breaking a rotten fake that isn't worth half-a-dollar? D'you think he wouldn't want to take those pieces home and look 'em over?"

"Let him," said Palliser sweetly. "It wouldn't amount to a lot o' trouble to change the pieces of the plate he broke for the ones we just put in the envelope. See the idea?"

"I'm beginning to," said Caleb. Then, in a tone of admiration, "There's no getting away from it, Palliser, you are a man of ideas."

Palliser rubbed his bony knuckles, and Simon Caleb poured out two whiskies with a generosity which rarely characterized his actions.

Under the spiritual influence the plan was discussed from every aspect. They even went to the length of a dress rehearsal with one of Simon's dinner plates. The minutest details were sand-papered to such a fine surface as to admit no possibility of the machinery failing them. It was decided that after the plate had been given to Lord Louis he should be asked to switch on the light. This would insure that he held it with one hand only; and also, from the location of the switch, that the piece of malachite would be beneath him at the time. A piece of catgut was to be used instead of the silk as being less likely to tangle or break. They arrived at the conclusion that a fishing cast would be the best thing for the purpose. A fine fishing cast, one end of which was to be fixed to the under side of the plate by a seal of rose wax. Simon's duty would be to pull the cast at the psychological moment.

There followed a period of haggling as to the division of spoils. Palliser stoutly adhered to his original claim for half, which, in view of the fact that nothing could be achieved without his duplicate plate, Simon was forced to accept. An agreement was duly drawn up to that effect, to which they both affixed their signatures. This document was red-sealed with further inroads on the whiskey decanter.

It was long after midnight before Palliser bade good night to Simon Caleb, the occasion, regarded in comparison with their previous relationship, being a memorable one. Simon's arm was about Palliser's

neck, and the words they employed were blurred with emotion and mutual regard.

At four-thirty on the following afternoon Palliser presented himself at Lord Louis' abode.

Lord Louis Lewis resided in the most select part of Clifton, his home being situated half-way between the Suspension Bridge and the Zoological Gardens. Here, day and night, the voices of civilization and those of the wild were co-mingled with the tune of motor sirens and the roaring of lions.

Lord Louis embodied all the virtues of English nobility. His appearance was aristocratic, his voice well modulated, and his manner suave and engaging. Upon occasion he was able to assert authority with a firmness that lost nothing from the discreet way in which he exercised it.

His response to Palliser's enquiries as to how he did was courteous if not effusive.

"Very well, I thank you," he said. "Do I gather from your presence that you have found something likely to interest me?"

"I have indeed," replied Palliser. "There is a bit of china down town which I am sure your lordship would be glad to have."

"Eggshell?" asked Lord Louis.

"Ah! Ruby-back," said Palliser. "Lovely quality. A plate," he added; "and the decoration is some of the best I have ever seen."

From his waistcoat pocket Lord Louis produced his eyeglass case.

"Let me see it," he was pleased to remark.

"Unfortunately," said Palliser, "that's just what I can't do. It's down at Simon Caleb's, in Hennigan Street. It was left him by an uncle who died a few days ago."

This falsehood was inspired by Lord Louis' irritating curiosity as to the origin of his purchases. They had congratulated themselves that this bereavement would prove an admirable blind.

Lord Louis clicked his tongue sympathetically.

"And you think this plate would attract me?" he said.

"I know it would," said Palliser. "The two shades of gilding alone are worth the money, and, held up to the light——"

Lord Louis intervened.

"You have omitted to mention the price," he said.

"Five hundred is what he asks," said Palliser, clearing his throat.

His lordship raised his eyebrows.

"A high figure!" he remarked. "It must, indeed, be a remarkable piece to justify such a demand. Perhaps Mr. Caleb would be willing to take less."

Palliser shook his head dubiously.

"Caleb is a funny man," he said. "'Cute, mind you, but, if you understand me, funny."

"A rare combination," remarked Lord Louis.

"It is," said Palliser deferentially. "I don't know if your Lordship is free to take a look at it this afternoon."

Lord Louis glanced at his watch.

"I had an appointment," he said, "but it is immaterial. If you will wait until I have made a telephone call I shall be pleased to accompany you. Those Egyptian cigarettes in the porphyry casket might claim your attention. I have them especially imported from Ismailia."

"Oh, thank you — thanks!" said Palliser; "I don't mind if I do."

Palliser drew a sigh of satisfaction as the door closed behind Lord Louis. He helped himself to a cigarette, which he lit with a match taken from a small stand of Chinese jade. So excellent a smoke did this prove that he was fain to replenish his own case from his host's abundant store.

Things were proceeding admirably for the firm of Palliser and Caleb. Already he felt that his share of the spoils was crisping in his pockets.

He rose to his feet as Lord Louis entered the apartment. An invitation to a glass of wine before starting was received with a respect that an acquaintance with his lordship's cellar justly inspired. The journey to Simon's shop was improved by a pleasant discussion upon the qualities of the old Madeira so recently enjoyed.

Simon Caleb was standing behind his counter when they arrived, and Palliser greeted him warmly.

"This is Mr. Caleb, your Lordship," he said. "Simon, here is Lord Louis Lewis, who kindly wants to have a look at that eggshell plate."

"Mr. Palliser informs me that it is a very rare

specimen," said Lord Louis after favouring Simon with a very gracious inclination of the head.

"And so it is," said Simon; "but I haven't made up my mind that I want to sell it."

"In which respect you are not peculiar," said Lord Louis. "I have yet to meet the dealer who does not preface a sale with precisely that remark."

The unexpected nature of this comment temporarily deprived Simon of a fitting rejoinder.

"Come, come, your Lordship," said Palliser; "that's hardly fair. You forgot this plate was a sort of heirloom — been in the family for fifty years. Mr. Caleb here, was very fond of his poor uncle. Isn't that right, Simon?"

Below the level of the counter Simon was winding a small piece of catgut round the forefinger of his left hand.

"He was always good to me," he said with moving sentiment; "always — and that's where it is. Still, there'd be no harm in your having a look, would there?"

Lord Louis tucked his malacca cane under his right arm and placed his gloves upon the counter.

"That is the precise purpose of my visit," he said.

Simon stooped and took the plate from a shelf beneath him. He was careful to hold it at the exact spot where the gut cast had been sealed to the rim.

"Here you are then," said he, and drew a deep breath for the coming ordeal.

Lord Louis took the plate in his right hand, holding it lightly, as such delicate ware demands.

"It feels a trifle heavy," he remarked, balancing it on the tips of his fingers. "I'll just put on my glasses."

"Very dark in here," said Palliser, who had joined Simon behind the counter.

"There's a switch at your elbow, my lord," said Simon, indicating the spot.

"Let me——" said Palliser.

"Please, do not disturb yourself," Lord Louis remarked. "I can manage very well by myself."

He took a step towards the switch, the plate perilously poised upon the extreme tips of his fingers. Immediately beneath his hand was the slab of green malachite upon which the genuine plate had met its fate. Beyond all question the moment had arrived. Lord Louis had no sooner laid his hand upon the electric switch than Simon gave the cast a short but determined pull, at the same time releasing it at his end so that the fall should be undisturbed.

In a futile effort to save the plate Lord Louis' stick fell from beneath his arm and alighted, head downwards, upon the largest fragment. This added shock caused a shower of splinters to rise in the air and descend again over his lordship's boots and thence to the floor.

"What have you done? What have you done?" yelled Simon, grovelling out through the flap-covered opening in the counter.

Lord Louis, after his strenuous effort to avert the disaster immediately regained his dignity and raised himself to his full height.

"I cannot accout for the accident in any way," he said. "It seemed to me as though the plate moved in my hand."

Simon was distraught.

"A fine thing," he moaned, "to go smashing about like that!"

"Very unlucky!" said Palliser, who, on hands and knees, was dragging the floor for the tell-tale cast, which, by good fortune, he found almost at once. "Most unlucky!"

Rising to his feet, he placed his find, which during the fall had severed its connection with the plate, into a large brass bowl near at hand.

"How did you come to drop it?" demanded Simon, his voice rising to a shrill wail.

"I have said," replied Lord Louis, "that I am unable to account for the accident."

"You'll have to!" cried Simon emphasizing his words by a blow on the counter. "You'll have to account for it — every penny — whether you want to or not."

Lord Louis raised his hand in a gesture commanding silence.

"I think," he said, "you forget the respect due to my station. Mr. Palliser will assure you that I am the last man in the world who would permit your loss to go unindemnified. Please do not address me again with such a lack of restraint."

"Well," said Simon, slightly mollified, "if your lordship speaks so fair I'm sure I apologize for giving offence."

"Then," said Lord Louis, "be so good as to collect those pieces and give them to me. If, after inspection, I find them to be of the first quality I shall be pleased to pay any reasonable claim you may advance."

"I was going to ask five hundred for it," said Simon.

"The circumstances being as they are," said Lord Louis, "I am in no position to offer any objection."

"Simon," said Palliser, "take his lordship into the parlour. I'll make a parcel of these pieces, my lord, as perhaps you'd like to look them over at home."

"That will suit me very well," said Lord Louis; "especially as I have omitted to bring my cheque book."

Simon led the way to the parlour. Here he exerted himself to reduce the effect upon his patron created by his recent outburst.

"I don't know what your lordship will think of me," he said, "for speaking in the way I did."

"Your words were inspired by the heat of the moment," said Lord Louis; "at the same time it is well to guard against a too vigorous expression before one has fully grasped the perspective of a situation."

"That's so," said Simon.

"These crises," proceeded Lord Louis, "are sent to test our powers of self-control."

"I suppose they are," acceded Simon. "I will say that your lordship's behaviour is more than any one could have bargained for. You take the loss of five hundred pounds without turning a hair."

"It is nothing," said Lord Louis, pinching the knot of his cravat.

At this moment Palliser returned with a packet containing the broken pieces of the genuine plate. The substitute had been carefully secreted under the counter.

Lord Louis took the parcel and his departure. He had arranged, the next day being Sunday, that Palliser and Simon should call for their cheque on Monday morning. Despite his outward calm he was by no means satisfied that the accident had been fortuitous. His sensitive finger tips had been conscious of a sensation of liveliness on the part of the plate, as though it had moved of its own accord. That this feeling was the sheerest imagination he was bound to believe. He had been quite by himself when the accident happened, the nearest of the two dealers having been well over six feet away. And yet——

Then, again, the price was very high. Assuming the plate to have been of the finest quality, five hundred pounds was a great deal to ask.

There is, however, a bright side to everything; and what Lord Louis lacked in gaiety was more than made up for by the satisfaction experienced by the firm of Palliser and Caleb. From start to finish no single hitch had occurred to mar the complete success of their operations.

Arrived at his home, Lord Louis partook of a modest repast; and, after a glass of light port and a couple of walnuts, he proceeded to cement together the pieces of broken plate. With the aid of a strong adhesive and an infinite fund of patience the delicate operation was accomplished. It was, indeed, a beautiful example of porcelain — and yet, strangely enough, familiar. Somewhere he had seen this plate before. He knew it well, every detail of it — that girl riding upon the ass; the grotesque male figure with the porcupine beard; the two shades of gilding in the vine pattern encircling the rim.

There was no room for doubt — this plate was one which had disappeared from his own collection some twelve years before. Yet Simon Caleb had said that it belonged to his uncle, who had treasured it for half a century. That was odd.

Then, in a flash, a long-disused cell in Lord Louis' brain awoke, and he knew, if this was indeed his plate, there would be a series of small pinholes on the back in much the same formation as the constellation of Cassiopeia.

He reversed the plate and there were the pinholes, just as he remembered them.

Lord Louis had accounted for the disappearance of the plate by the theory that one of the maidservants had broken it, and, rather than confess her carelessness, had hidden all trace of what had occurred by throwing away the pieces. In the light of recent events, however, he decided to ask his housekeeper

what servant had been with them when the loss had been discovered.

He rang the bell and ordered the butler to summon Mrs. Swan.

When she arrived he asked her the question. Mrs. Swan pursed her lips in thought.

"I couldn't exactly say," she said —" not without looking at my book."

From the book it was ascertained that a maid named Ann Minter had left their service, through ill-health, a few days after the plate had been missed. She was a Bristol girl, and had given her aunt's address when writing for a character.

Lord Louis made a note of the address, thanked Mrs. Swan, and sallied forth to pay a late call upon Ann Minter's aunt. He was somewhat embarrassed to find the good lady in bed and suffering from acute phthisis; so he lost no time in explaining the object of his visit. Removing the wrappings he held up the plate for her inspection, at the same time asking whether she had ever seen it before.

Mrs. Minter recognized it at once as the one she had sold for sixpence some few days before. Lord Louis received this news with just indignation. From a question he put to her he realized that Simon Caleb was the man who had bought it. He then inquired after the niece, and was distressed to hear of her premature demise. Having left a sovereign upon the invalid's counterpane he bade her farewell.

One thing was certain — Simon Caleb was not above the practice of deception. He had wilfully misrepresented the true origin of the plate and had imposed upon an infirm old lady with a shameful disregard for honest dealing. Lord Louis resolved, even though circumstances compelled him to write Caleb a cheque for five hundred pounds that half that sum should go to Mrs. Minter.

Having arrived at this decision he dismissed the subject from his thoughts and directed his footsteps towards the Conservative Club, where he started a game of two hundred up at billiards with his friend Mr. Russell Yorke.

This Mr. Yorke was also a keen lover of Oriental porcelain and had shared the subsequent pleasure derived from many of Lord Louis' purchases.

It was during the course of the game that another link was forged in the chain of evidence against Simon Caleb and his partner.

Declining to use the long rest, Lord Louis, in defiance of the rules, was sprawling over the table to accomplish a difficult shot; the whole of his body, with the exception of his feet, being disposed upon the green cloth. At the critical moment, before the stroke was made, he experienced a sharp pain just above his right ankle. The company being male, Lord Louis permitted himself the luxury of a small license of speech.

"Anything the matter?" demanded Mr. Yorke.

"Something pricked me," said Lord Louis.

He swung round to a sitting posture and bared his leg, to find that he was bleeding from a small but jagged cut.

"How very odd," he said, and felt over the surface of his sock. "There is nothing here which could have done this."

"Maybe a nail has dropped into the cuff of your trouser," suggested Mr. Yorke.

"Possibly," said Lord Louis. He turned it down and revealed a triangular piece of porcelain about an inch long. "Dear me!" he exclaimed. "How did this get here? Ah! I know. I smashed a plate to-day, and one of the pieces must have slipped in here unnoticed."

Mr. Yorke took the fragment and held it up to the light.

"H'm!" he continued. "You didn't lose much when you broke this. French imitation of eggshell, is it not?"

"On the contrary," said Lord Louis rather coldly; "it is one of the finest specimens I have had the good fortune to examine. I have the rest of the plate here if you would care to see it." He undid the wrappings and placed it in his friend's hands.

"You have cemented it already?" remarked that gentleman.

"Yes," said Lord Louis, unexpectedly adding: "Good heavens!" For it had suddenly occurred to him that the plate before him, so far as the actual number of pieces was concerned, was intact. There was no room for another fragment.

When he had explained the reason for his ejaculation his companion was duly astonished. Lord Louis took the lately discovered piece and examined it minutely.

"You were right," he said. "This is common French." He turned it over in his hand. "Now, what in the world is that for?" and he pointed to a seal of rose-coloured wax, from which a short length of gut was protruding.

"Looks like a bit of fishing gut," said Mr. Yorke. He bent forward for a closer scrutiny. "Yes, it is. That particular knot beyond the seal is only tied by anglers."

Lord Louis' brow contracted. Dark thoughts were chasing through his brain.

"With your permission," he said, "we will chalk up the score and finish our game on another occasion."

He wrapped up the plate, put the small piece in his waistcoat pocket and hurried from the club. So great was his agitation he failed to observe that his sock suspender, which in the excitement of his discovery he had not refastened, was trailing behind him, gathering dust and fluff with every step he took.

It has been hinted that Lord Louis Lewis was no fool. Once fairly started on the trail he followed it with marvellous accuracy. A minute examination of the morsel of china in his pocket revealed the fact that the cast had become kinked where it joined the wax, and had, in consequence, broken. From this observation, he reconstructed, with unswerving per-

ception, the whole plot of which he was to have been victim. He realized now why the shop had been unlighted; why the plate had been thrust into his hands so unceremoniously and before he had time to fix his glasses. The sensation of the plate moving on his finger tips was now explained.

He smiled grimly at the recollection of having been lured into Simon's parlour. Obviously this had been done to allow the change to have been made between the real and spurious fragments of plate. It was clear that some disaster must have happened to the real one before he came upon the scene, and this plot had been hatched that the two dealers might recover their loss at his expense.

Lord Louis carefully considered the course of action he should pursue. He did not relish carrying the matter into a court of law, on account of the publicity in which he would become embroiled. Consequently he decided to deal with the problem after his own fashion, and addressed a note asking Palliser and Caleb to call on him at eleven-thirty on the following Monday.

At this point the clock on the mantelpiece struck twelve. Realizing that the Sabbath had begun, Lord Louis banished from his mind all further considerations and betook himself to bed.

Punctual to the appointment, Palliser and Simon presented themselves at eleven-thirty on Monday morning, and were shown into a comfortable smoking room. They had not long to wait before Lord

Louis, immaculately dressed and wearing in his buttonhole a pink malmaison, entered the room.

Taking the chair by the writing table, he graciously invited the twain to be seated. After a few well-balanced observations upon the weather he begged Simon Caleb to present his account. Then he adjusted his pincenez and read the contents aloud:

"Simon Caleb, Art Dealer, to Lord Louis Lewis, of Bruton House, Clifton. To breaking one eggshell plate, value £500. Price, £500."

He laid the bill upon the table.

"Mr. Caleb," he said, "you consider this claim to be a just and fair one?"

Simon hesitated.

"Your lordship said you'd be willing to pay it," he remarked rather huskily.

"I did," said Lord Louis. "But I merely wish to know that your conscience is clear."

Simon nodded and fixed his eyes on the picture rail.

"I understand," Lord Louis proceeded, "your reason for valuing this plate so highly is a family one. I assume, if it had not been the property of your uncle you would have been willing to accept less."

"I might," said Simon. "But it's hard to say."

"It 'ud on'y make the difference of a pound or two," said Palliser. "Four hundred and ninety-seven at the lowest."

"Do you value your uncle's association at no more than three sovereigns?" he asked.

"That's all," said Simon.

"You will forgive me if I speak bluntly," said Lord Louis. "But I have reason to believe that your uncle, whoever he may be, had nothing to do with this plate — that he exists merely as a figment of imagination. I beg you will not so far forget yourself as to interrupt me. This plate was stolen from my collection some twelve years ago by a maidservant of the name of Ann Minter. You obtained it from her aunt at the price of sixpence."

Simon and Palliser gasped.

"I can substantiate every word I have uttered," said Lord Louis, leaning back in his chair.

"Even if it's true ——" began Simon.

Lord Louis placed his finger tips together.

"You are doubtless aware that it is my custom, in cases of this kind, to insist in a fair division of profits between the owner and the dealer. This, Mr. Caleb, will reduce your cheque to — let me see — two hundred and forty-eight pounds ten shillings. I will now fetch the plate." And, with a bow, he withdrew.

"Here's a go!" said Palliser. "He'll stick to what he says. What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothing," said Simon. "You're the loser. Your share will pay the old woman — not mine."

"None o' that!" he said. "We're partners in this deal. Do one crooked thing and I'll blow the whole game."

Simon beat the air in suppressed fury.

"It's all your fault," he said, "you and your rotten plan."

"Don't make a row," said Palliser. "A hundred

and fifty is better than nothing. Will you play fair?"

Simon threw back his head.

"Fair?" he exclaimed. "Fair! You're a nice one to talk about fair."

At this juncture Lord Louis, carrying the cemented plate, entered the room.

"Well, gentlemen," said he, "what decision have you come to?"

"We agree," said Palliser.

"Capital," said Lord Louis. "We will now proceed to our next inquiry."

Palliser looked up quickly.

"Next?" he queried.

"That is what I said," remarked Lord Louis. "Here is the plate. You will see that, to the best of my ability, I have reunited the broken pieces. Pray observe there is not a single splinter missing."

"Your lordship has made a fine job of it," said Palliser, with an effort to appear appreciative.

Lord Louis smiled.

"I am glad of your appreciation," he said. "Now, gentlemen, it is here that I am in need of your advice. How comes it since the plate is intact, that I find myself with a piece left over?"

Simon swallowed heavily.

"Can't say that I follow your lordship's meaning," said he.

Drawing from his pocket the fragment of china which had fallen into his trouser leg, Lord Louis placed it before them.

"There!" said he. "I found this in the cuff of my trouser. It was not there when I entered your shop, for my clothes are thoroughly brushed in every part; but it was there soon afterwards. I think your imaginations will supply you with the circumstances which caused this piece of very indifferent French imitation to have arrived where I have indicated. I am also of the opinion that you could offer an excellent reason for the presence of this morsel of coloured wax on the underside of the rim with the fishing cast attachment."

Palliser stooped and busied himself with his bootlaces. Simon rose and walked unsteadily towards the window.

"I am waiting for your explanation," said Lord Louis; then, as no answer came, he struck the table a heavy blow. With a fine disregard for trivialities, he made no effort to stem the tide of ink that, as a result of his violence, flowed from the inverted pot.

"Your silence condemns you," he said. "You stand accused of a despicable fraud. Such conduct cannot go unpunished. I shall act in the following way."

With inexorable justice Lord Louis commanded that each of the dealers should pay to the old lady from whom the plate had been obtained a sum of fifty pounds. Palliser's protest that he had no money was waved aside. Lord Louis reminded him that he was himself indebted to Palliser for much about that sum. This he proposed to pay, in person, to Ann Minter's

aunt. Failing implicit obedience, he would place the case forthwith in the hands of the police.

"Though little versed in the law," he concluded, "I am confident you would both meet with a severe sentence. The original sum you laid out for the plate I will repay. This will relieve me of any further liability in the matter."

So saying he took from a drawer in his writing table a postal order for the value of sixpence. This he tore in half and divided between them.

There is little more to narrate. The essence of attack being in surprise, Lord Louis' bombshell completely routed the two dealers, who, after accepting his terms, made their retreat with all available expedition.

The door having closed behind them, Lord Louis mopped up the dripping ink with a clean sheet of blotting paper. This done, he lit a cigarette and settled down, with unruffled calm, to peruse the leading article in the *Connoisseur*.

In contrast to this cameo of perfect breeding was the behaviour of Caleb and Palliser. Without a word having passed between them, they took the road leading towards the Suspension Bridge; and it was not until they had reached the centre of that interesting structure that the full blast of their feelings found expression.

The fight itself was more remarkable for its intensity than for any particular exhibition of skill.

In answer to the magistrate's inquiry the toll-keeper

was unable to state which of the combatants was the aggressor. The desire to kill appeared to be equally distributed. Other witnesses declared that, had the parapet of the bridge been a few inches lower neither of the twain would have survived to attend the legal proceedings which occurred on the following day before a crowded court.

CHAPTER II

THE REYNOLDS GROUP

"THIS," said Lord Louis Lewis, pointing to a three-quarter length picture, leaning against a pillar at the foot of the staircase, "is a Reynolds. The lady represented was, I believe, a very great aunt of mine. The light is indifferent, but even so the touch of the master is unmistakable."

Mr. Russell Yorke adjusted his pincenez.

"A very remarkable piece of painting," he observed.

"You are right," assented Lord Louis, "but, on the other hand, the composition is extremely bad."

"I was about to say as much," agreed Mr. Yorke. "I am almost tempted to believe that this portrait has been cut down."

Lord Louis nodded. "The possibility occurred to me," he said. "My poor cousin, from whom I acquired it, after his decease, was the type of man who would not think twice about committing such an act."

"You astonish me," exclaimed Mr. Yorke, raising his eyebrows. "What object could be attained by so doing?"

Lord Louis shrugged his shoulders. "It is mere conjecture," he answered. "Possibly the original frame had worn out and rather than buy another he cut the picture to suit one he had in hand."

"It is hard to conceive a relative of yours being

capable of so wanton an act," Mr. Yorke commented.

"Ah, Yorke," said Lord Louis, "the artistic temperament was not evenly distributed amongst the members of my family. The particular branch, of which my unhappy cousin was the last descendant, was singularly free from æsthetic tastes. It would be no injustice to say that, beyond the possession of very fair palates, there was little to mark them as people of refinement."

"You speak of your *unhappy* cousin?" queried Mr. Yorke.

"For two reasons," replied Lord Louis. "The first a conventional one, because he is no longer with us; the second because he hastened his own end by alcoholic excess. During his last years, he was seldom sober, and was ministered upon by an old man-servant who, if rumour speaks the truth, was almost as dissolute as his master."

"A sad story," said Mr. Yorke. "I read something of it in the paper a day or two ago. The estate he left was not large."

"It was not," said Lord Louis. "A matter of a few hundreds, the house in which he died, and some furniture which went to the man-servant Griffe. The remainder of the family treasures, with the exception of this portrait, a crate or two of books and a very perfect Nant Garw dessert service which came to me, had been sold to gratify his unconquerable thirst."

Mr. Yorke's gaze reverted to the Reynolds portrait.

"I take it," he said, "you have not yet examined this portrait minutely."

"It only arrived to-day," was the reply, "and I confess my attention was more readily attracted towards the Nant Garw,— china, as you know, being my particular hobby."

"If you have no objection," ventured Mr. Yorke, "it would be interesting to remove the picture from its frame. We should then be able to judge whether or no it has been tampered with."

Lord Louis touched the bell. "I will order my man to bring a pair of pliers," he remarked. "There is nothing I enjoy more than elucidating mysteries of the antique."

Badger, the butler, answered the bell and received Lord Louis' instructions. As he was leaving the room he heard the nobleman remark:

"The picture is in a very dirty state. I will have it taken away and cleaned before we hang it up."

The task of removing the picture from the frame was easily accomplished. It was then clearly evident Lord Louis' surmise was correct. The painted surface of the canvas did not leave off with the front arras of the stretcher, as is usual, but ran right round to the back. Here, however, the surface was so coated with dirt that all detail had vanished.

"We should be better able to see what it is all about," suggested Mr. Yorke, "if we took the canvas off the stretcher and removed some of this dirt with a cut potatoe."

The tacks which held the canvas down were old

and rusty, and some time elapsed before they were extracted and the two experts were able to commence cleaning away the ingrained filth from the surface.

In quite a short time details began to emerge, in the same way that a photograph appears on the plate in a dark room. Lord Louis had been working on the right hand side of the canvas, when suddenly he remarked:

"This is very odd! I don't know what you make of it, but I should describe that as a man's hand."

Mr. Yorke turned his attention to the part indicated.

"You are right," he exclaimed. "It is a man's hand. But why should it be there?"

Lord Louis rubbed his chin.

"It occurs to me," he said, "that this portrait is a section of a larger group." Mr. Yorke nodded his head, and Lord Louis continued: "Everything points to that conclusion. Sir Joshua Reynolds would never have been guilty of such bad composition. Observe how the lines run out of the picture. The manner in which the figure is cramped by its margin. Evidently there was a male figure, probably that of my very great uncle, standing behind the sofa on the right hand side."

Mr. Russell Yorke was swift to endorse Lord Louis' hypothesis.

"Let us see," he said, "if there is any indication of what the left side of the picture portrayed."

After much energy, with the raw potatoe, they were rewarded by another discovery. At a spot where the

knees of the late Lady Anne Sefton were cut by the edge of the canvas rested two small hands, clasped together. When the picture was cut these little hands had been severed an inch or two above the wrists.

"Our enquiry moves quickly," said Lord Louis, with suppressed excitement. "Beyond doubt this group was composed of three figures. Lord and Lady Sefton and their infant son."

Mr. Yorke was quite agitated.

"What can have induced any one to destroy so beautiful a work?" he queried. "If this picture had been whole it would have been almost priceless. To judge by the technique it must have been painted at the zenith of Sir Joshua's career."

Lord Louis straightened his back.

"Yorke," he said, "I shall not rest until I have solved the mystery and regained the missing portions of this work. Let us take a glass of wine together and drink success to the enterprise."

. . . . . .

Two mornings later, Mr. Russell Yorke received a wire from Lord Louis requesting his immediate presence at Bruton House, the latter's abode. Scenting a fresh development with regard to the Reynolds Group, Mr. Yorke lost no time in obeying the summons.

He was shown into a small breakfast room, where Lord Louis was discussing a pot of coffee, a rack of dry toast and a dish of hot-house peaches. Propped up against a silver rose-bowl, in the centre of the

table, was an old, calf-bound book of MSS. engaging his attention while he broke his fast.

"I am delighted you were able to come," said Lord Louis, beckoning his guest into a chair by his side. "Will you join me in a cup of coffee?"

Receiving a courteous negative, he proceeded to explain his reasons for sending the wire.

"In examining the crate of books, which came from my unhappy cousin, I made this discovery." He indicated the volume before him. "It is no less than a diary from the hand of Lady Anne Sefton, whose portrait was occupying our attention the day before yesterday. Listen to this passage." And he turned over several pages of MSS. "Here we are: 'The portrait group of John, myself and little Philip proceeds vastly well. Sir Joshua says it bids fair to outrival all his other works. A most pleasant man, Sir Joshua, and dexterous with his brush beyond belief. Sitting for his portrait causes John to display greater choler than heretofore. I upbraided him roundly for want of sobriety. He had partaken so freely, even at the early hour of eleven of the clock, as to be unable to stand, and did rock so perilously at the back of the sofa as to cause little Philip to be palsied of fright, and Sir Joshua to lay aside his brushes and declare it availed nothing to proceed.'" Lord Louis broke off the narrative to observe: "It is evident my unhappy cousin's failings were inherited."

Mr. Yorke nodded. "This is absorbing," he remarked. "Is there any more?"

Lord Louis turned over a couple of pages.

"If you will look here," he said, "you will see that Lady Sefton made a rough sketch in outline of the arrangement of the figures. There! She herself, as we rightly surmised, was the central subject. Her husband is supporting himself at the back of the couch, a wise precaution I have no doubt. At his feet is a work-basket containing an embroidery frame. On our left we have the son, Philip, beside whom a mongrel dog is seated. For an amateur the drawing is not without merit."

"A most valuable record," observed Mr. Yorke.

"True," Lord Louis acquiesced. "We now pass over a period of two years. By the way," he interpolated, whilst seeking the later entry, "she mentions the dimensions of the portrait as being six feet by eight feet. Now then. This explains how the picture came to be divided. The reason, you will learn, being domestic, and of a painful character."

"I am all attention," said Mr. Yorke, resting his elbows on the table. Lord Louis began to read:

"'The differences between myself and John have reached the final stage. I have decided that I can no longer dwell with him beneath the same roof.' An interval of four days, then this: 'John is much rejoiced by my determination. It is settled that I remain here, whilst he goes to London. (There is small doubt that his dissolute ways will make him many friends in that city.)'" Lord Louis turned over three or four pages. "Listen to this," he said. "'A great trouble has arisen over the division of

our effects. John insists that the Reynolds group belongs to him, for all he borrowed the money from my private purse wherewith to pay for it. . . . We have come to an agreement at last, but I fear a sorry one, and tremble as to what Sir Joshua would say should news come to his ears. John's figure is to be cut from the group.' "

Mr. Yorke clasped his hands in pious horror, and Lord Louis nodded sympathetically.

"There is a passage here explaining how this was done," he said. "It appears that Lord John was much incensed to find Lady Anne's work-basket at his feet, and accordingly cut off the lower part of the canvas on which this was painted, thereby transforming his portrait into a three-quarter length. The study in still life, which, I ascertain from the diary, measured twenty-four by thirty, was retained by her ladyship."

"Is there no mention of why the child was severed from the group," demanded Mr. Yorke.

Lord Louis picked up the diary and read the ensuing passage:

"'Many anxieties have I been caused as to who should have the custody of little Philip. Although John bears the child nought but ill-will he intends to take him from me. Rather than lose the dear infant I put it to John that he should have the portrait of the child while I retained the little one himself. I did argue that a painted picture would be less disposed to cast John into a frenzy than its living presentment. To this point John conceded, and he set about, there-

with, to the further despoiling of Sir Joshua's masterpiece.' "

Lord Louis moistened his finger and turned over three pages.

"This is the last entry which concerns our investigation," he remarked. ". . . 'John has gone, and Philip and myself were vastly joyed to see the last of him. I pray, most devoutly, that never again shall I be burthened by the sight of him. He carried away his own and Philip's portrait and what little wine the cellars contained. The portrait of myself has been framed, but presents a sorry appearance, being over narrow for its length and top heavy withal. I have also found a frame for the painting of my work-basket and embroidery tambour, but that, too, looks indifferent well with John's ankles and feet in the background.' "

"An artistic tragedy," murmured Mr. Yorke.

"And a domestic one," added Lord Louis. "It should, however, assist us greatly in prosecuting our search. We know, now, there are three sections of the portrait to be found instead of two."

Mr. Yorke rubbed his chin. "The work-basket should not be hard to trace," he ventured. "It might well have come to you with Lady Anne's portrait, seeing that it was she who retained that portion."

"Quite so," said Lord Louis. "A call on my late cousin's man-servant might not come amiss. He is still living at his late master's house, the lease having been made over to him for his lifetime. In the

meanwhile I shall insert this advertisement in the leading journals. I do not anticipate any profitable results, but there is always a remote chance." And he handed his friend a sheet of notepaper bearing the words:

"Lord Louis Lewis, of Bruton House, Clifton, would be glad to purchase the following works of art: The portrait of a gentleman, minus his right hand, and both feet below the knees. Dimensions: 54 by 24 ins. Period: middle of eighteenth century. The portrait of a small boy and mongrel dog. Both hands of the child must be missing, and the background to consist of red drapery and a conventional landscape. Dimensions: 78 by 35 ins. Period: the same."

Mr. Yorke nodded his approval, and returned the paper with the words: "You have omitted to mention the work-basket?"

"Purposely," replied his host. "If it should still be in the possession of my late cousin's servant it is wiser not to arouse his suspicions until I have made a personal call."

"Quite," endorsed Mr. Yorke; then adding: "Is this person a resident of Bristol?"

"No. He is living in Wells," replied Lord Louis, "at a house called 'La Peruse.'"

Mr. Yorke rose. "I shall look forward to hear fruitful results from your advertisement," he said, and retired.

. . . . . .

Lord Louis' advertisement appeared on the follow-

ing morning, and automatically found its way to millions of households.

The person on whom it created the greatest effect was Mr. Eden Kineagie. It was this gentleman's boast that he knew more about pictures than any one else.

Mr. Kineagie was an odd, round-shouldered little man of indeterminate age. He affected a wide-brimmed clerical hat, a brusque manner and a semicircle of grey hair which vignetted his thin-lipped mouth.

The announcement attracted his attention at breakfast on the second day of its insertion.

Being a man who was never content with a single occupation, Mr. Kineagie was reading the paper, eating a plate of porridge and buttoning his jacket to a hole in the tablecloth all at the same moment. He had placed the button in the hole for the tenth time when the significance of Lord Louis' requirements came home to him. Forgetful of everything else, he sprang to his feet and made for the door. The direct result of this action was the transference of the entire breakfast service to the carpet. This *débacle* Mr. Kineagie ignored, and hurried into the hall, the tethered cloth flapping aimlessly behind him. Unlocking a door with a Yale key, he admitted himself to a large gallery, the walls of which were covered with priceless works of art. In the farthest corner was a narrow three-quarter length of an eighteenth century gentleman, whose right hand passed beyond the margin of the frame.

Before this work Mr. Kineagie halted.

"Must be — must be," he muttered. "Now I *shall* find out who you are." He ran back to the door and, thrusting his head outside, shouted: "Oliver! Oliver!"

"Sir," came the reply from a short distance away.

"Bring a tape-measure and a time-table," was the order.

When the man arrived with these articles, Kineagie snatched the measure from his hand and snapped out.

"Train to Bristol. Look it up!" and so saying, mounted a miniature flight of steps to ascertain the exact size of the portrait. Having done so he compared the result with dimensions stated in the advertisement.

"Odd, very odd," he muttered, with puckered brow. Then, "Ah, of course, I'm not allowing for the piece turned in. Well, train?" The last remark was fired at Oliver, who, with an enquiring forefinger was searching the columns of the A.B.C.

"There is one in fifteen minutes, sir," said he. "The next——" But Mr. Kineagie did not wait for the next.

"Get a taxi, sharp," he exclaimed, thrusting the servant before him from the room.

A couple of minutes later Mr. Kineagie was hurrying westward to Paddington Station.

On the same morning Lord Louis Lewis's letter-bag contained a large and varied mail. Among the few he opened was one from a young lady, who in-

formed Lord Louis that she taught water-colour painting, the French and Spanish tongues, at the moderate rate of two shillings and sixpence per hour.

There was a second from a large firm of stock brokers urging him to purchase a block of rubber shares.

A third from a private individual, who "begged to inform Lord Lewis" that he had a motor cycle and sidecar, combination, which he was prepared to sacrifice at a low figure for "spot cash."

And the last from a West African Missionary Society imploring his lordship for a donation to assist them in the valuable work of carrying the Gospel to the heart of the Congo.

All of which communications, by some inexplicable mental process, owed their existence to the insertion of his advertisement.

By an odd chance, Mr. Russell Yorke received a note, by the same post, asking him to run over to Wells, that day, and take lunch with his brother-in-law.

Some time having elapsed since their last meeting, and being free from other appointments, Mr. Yorke decided to go. He took an early train and arrived at that town before twelve. On presenting his card at the hotel he found that his brother-in-law was out and not expected to return till one o'clock.

Rather than wait in a stuffy hotel room, Mr. Yorke went for a walk to kill time.

After walking some ten minutes he observed a green bench, in the shade of a chestnut tree. Here he sat

himself and lit a pipe. In that unconscious way in which our attention is attracted by unimportant trifles, he began to take stock of his surroundings. Immediately facing him was a little Georgian house, bearing the name "La Peruse." Something in the name struck a familiar note in his mind. Then he recalled that "La Peruse" was the house in which Lord Louis' cousin had breathed his last. Mr. Yorke rose to his feet. Here was a chance to assist Lord Louis in his investigation.

Without considering what he was going to say, he crossed and rang the bell. After waiting some moments a window in the area was raised and a head thrust out.

"Yes," said the owner of the head; "what do you want?"

Being a somewhat conventional person, Mr. Yorke resented this mode of address, and made no other answer beyond ringing the bell a second time. The head withdrew, and presently the front door was opened. The sight which greeted Mr. Yorke was not a pleasant one. His best friend could not have described Mr. Griffe as anything but a plain man. At no time could his features have been attractive, but now his ill looks were heightened by inflamed patches, the outward manifestations of intemperance.

"Well?" grunted Mr. Griffe (for so he was named).

"I am a friend of Lord Louis Lewis's," said Mr. Yorke, "who was a legatee under your late master's will."

"Well," he repeated.

"Lord Louis is anxious to find the whereabouts of a certain picture, which he believes may have been in the possession of your master at the time of his death."

"The picture was sent to him," replied Griffe warily.

"I am not referring to the portrait of the lady," went on Mr. Yorke, "but to a smaller canvas of lesser importance. The subject was a homely one, consisting merely of a work-basket and embroidery frame."

Mr. Griffe's eyes narrowed. "I know nothing of it," he said.

"I thought perhaps you might remember to have seen it," Mr. Yorke hazarded. "Lord Louis was to inherit all the pictures, and I thought it not unlikely that this particular one might have got stowed away in a lumber room."

"I tell you I know nothing of it," repeated Griffe, in an uncompromising tone.

"Then I will trespass no further on your time," replied Mr. Yorke. "I wish you good day," and he retreated down the steps.

"Half a minute," grunted Mr. Griffe rather hesitatingly. "Is this picture valuable, eh?"

"That is not the point," retorted Mr. Yorke. "All your late employer's pictures are now Lord Louis' property, and if it is still here and you have failed to send it, you are committing a breach of the law."

"Well, it isn't here, so I'm not," snapped Griffe, and slammed the door.

Mr. Yorke turned away, not a little ruffled by the rudeness of his reception. Passing the garden gate he noticed a "To Let" board in front of the house which he had not observed before.

. . . . . .

At half-past three, that afternoon, Lord Louis Lewis had a caller. Badger, the butler, entered with a card, bearing the name "Mr. Eden Kineagie."

"Show the gentleman in," said Lord Louis, placing a marker in the book he was reading.

A moment later and Mr. Kineagie was ushered into his presence.

Ignoring all formalities, Mr. Kineagie went straight at the object of his call. "Where's the picture?" he rapped out. "Let's have a look at it."

"I perceive," said Lord Louis, "that I have not cast my nets in vain. You are here, Mr. Kineagie, in answer to my advertisement?"

"I am here because of it," came the reply. "If you have got the picture, let's have a look. My time is valuable."

"Follow me, then," said Lord Louis, and, smiling, led the way to an inner apartment, where the Reynolds, temporarily replaced in its frame, was hanging. "There!" he indicated.

Mr. Kineagie examined it minutely. He crossed to the window and threw back the curtains, thus admitting more light, then clambered up on a chair and glued his nose to the canvas. During the whole of

this period no word was spoken. Finally, he descended and turned his little bead-like eyes upon Lord Louis.

"I'll buy," he said. "How much?"

"I fear," remarked Lord Louis, "you cannot have read my advertisement very carefully. I wish to purchase, not to sell."

"Give you four thousand," Kineagie exclaimed. "She's no use without the man — and I've got him."

"Have you indeed," said Lord Louis, greatly interested. "I am delighted to hear it. I offer you five thousand for him, which is a fair price considering he is of no value without the lady."

Mr. Kineagie shot a shrewd glance at Lord Louis from under his bushy eyebrows.

"You have got to sell," he said. "I've been looking for this for years, and don't mean to lose it now." Lord Louis shrugged his shoulders. "I stop at nothing when I'm after a thing. Why, I have ruined people to get a picture I wanted."

"I question your ability to do so in my case," observed Lord Louis politely.

"Don't waste time," Mr. Kineagie cut in. "Are you going to sell?"

"Certainly not. I am just as determined to possess your portion of this group as you are to possess mine. Besides, let me remind you that the rest of the picture is still to be found, and until then the canvas will be of no real value to either of us. It would be to your evident advantage to accept my offer and leave the tiresome business of searching to me."

Mr. Kineagie scratched his chin. "I want the picture," he said, "not money."

"Our points of view are united," murmured Lord Louis. "It is a pity, for if we both retain this obstinate attitude the picture will never again appear as a whole. Let us return to the other room and discuss the matter in comfort."

Lord Louis found his companion a most difficult person to deal with. He resolutely declined to agree to any proposal, and it was not until Lord Louis had the inspiration to make an appeal to his sporting instincts that an understanding was arrived at. It was decided that whoever secured the part of the picture representing the child should be able to purchase from the other, at a fixed sum of four thousand pounds, the remaining portion or portions of the canvas. In order that there should be no unfairness, or special advantage, Lord Louis showed Kineagie certain passages in the diary, and also the little pencil sketch Lady Anne had made. The only thing that he refused to confide was where the portrait of Lady Anne had come from, as he did not wish Mr. Kineagie to steal a march on him with the man Griffe. Mr. Kineagie, in return told how he had acquired the portrait of Lord Sefton, having bought it at the Caledonian Market for a few shillings, from a man who had no idea at all where it came from.

Eventually Lord Louis rose to end the interview.

"Well, Mr. Kineagie," he said, "it will be interesting to see who wins the prize. I trust I may be forgiven for hoping it will not be you."

"Hum!" mumbled Kineagie, "you'll be disappointed then. The work-basket and the child will be in my gallery inside a month. You said these things, the diary and the painting, came from a cousin of yours. What did you say his name was?"

"I carefully omitted to mention either his name or address," replied Lord Louis with a smile. "The picture arrived from another city in company with that case of books, which I have not yet unpacked."

"Hum!" repeated Kineagie, and, followed by Lord Louis, walked across the hall towards the open front door, arriving there at the same moment that Mr. Russell Yorke turned in at the drive gates.

"Hullo, where did I put my hat?" he snapped.

"You left it in the smoking room, I fancy," said Lord Louis.

"So I did," he said, and quickly returned to that apartment, leaving Lord Louis to welcome the new arrival.

Mr. Kineagie's actions in the smoking room were brief but dishonourable. He put on his hat, then crossing to the table, slipped Lady Anne's diary under his overcoat. His eye was attracted by the wooden case containing the books. He stepped towards it and looked at the label, on which he found was written Lord Louis' address and that of the sender. This he whipped off and dropped into his pocket, then went straight from the room.

He acknowledged Lord Louis' farewell salute with a curt nod and walked briskly away.

"Wasn't that Eden Kineagie?" demanded Mr. Yorke.

"The same," replied Lord Louis, and, leading his guest to the smoke room, recounted all that had taken place.

"An eventful day," remarked Mr. Yorke. "I, too, have been following the scent of this mysterious group."

Thereupon Mr. Yorke told of his meeting with Griffe, which included a surprising wealth of detail doing great credit to his powers of observation.

At the conclusion Lord Louis puckered his brow. "It is good of you to have taken so much trouble," he said, "but I wonder if we have been wise to have aroused this man's suspicions."

"He undoubtedly knew nothing of the picture," replied Mr. Yorke.

"One can never be certain," mused Lord Louis, "Possibly he kept it without knowing it was of value; but, I fear, having learnt to the contrary, he will do all in his power to conceal its whereabouts. I must lose no time in paying him a visit."

"As you wish, of course," returned Mr. Yorke. "But I fear your reception will be no more cordial than mine was."

"I shall travel *incognito*," said Lord Louis, fingering his chin. "Did you say the house was to let?"

"There was an agent's board in the garden, yes."

"Good! I will get an order to view. This will ensure my gaining admittance." He stopped abruptly, his eyes upon the centre table.

"Strange," he said, "I could have sworn I left Lady Anne's diary on that table. I took it from that case to show to Mr. Kineagie."

"You returned it, unconsciously, perhaps," suggested Mr. Yorke.

Lord Louis walked over to the case to make sure.

"No, it is not here," he said, then added: "Dear me!" The last remark being inspired by the sight of the four tin tacks which had recently held the label to the side of the box.

"What's the matter?" demanded Mr. Yorke.

Lord Louis spoke very incisively. "Our friend Kineagie," he said, "does not intend the grass to grow beneath his feet. In returning to this room to fetch his hat he not only took Lady Anne's diary which will in no way aid his search, but tore off the label from this box — which, I now remember, bore my late cousin's address as well as my own. He will know now where the work-basket canvas may possibly be found." Mr. Yorke whistled. "I think," continued Lord Louis, picking up a time-table, "I should be wise to go to Wells immediately. Be so good as to look me up a train while I send a wire."

Mr. Yorke took the time-table, and Lord Louis addressed the following telegram to Mr. Kineagie, whose card he had retained:—

"Eden Kineagie. Staintons—Fellows Road, Hampstead, N.W.

"To remind you of the Eighth Commandment, which escaped your memory in my smoking room this afternoon. "LEWIS."

"There," he said, handing the form to Mr. Yorke, "I do not imagine that he will have returned home, but I should like him to know when he does that his theft has not passed unnoticed. What are the trains?"

"The last to-day left an hour ago. There is one in the morning at nine forty-five."

"I will catch that," said Lord Louis, "and unless I am much mistaken, I shall have the pleasure of Mr. Kineagie's company en route."

"May I see you off?" volunteered Mr. Yorke.

"Please do," replied the Peer. "It is possible you might do me a service at the station. Let us breakfast together here at eight-thirty."

"Delighted," said Mr. Yorke.

That night, at about two a. m. Lord Louis' house was broken into. The catch of a downstairs window was forced, and the sash raised, admitting an individual of inconspicuous appearance. This person's movements were not in accord with those of the average burglar. He carried neither bag nor weapon, but only an electric torch, the light from which he directed at the walls. He did not devote much time to anything until the light revealed the Reynolds portrait. Here, following the example of Eden Kineagie, he mounted a chair and exposed the canvas to a searching examination.

He paid particular attention to the left side of the picture. This done, a sigh of satisfaction escaped his lips. He then replaced the chair and slipped silently across the hall to inspect the front door. This was

secured by a Yale lock and not bolted. Accordingly he returned to the room where his entrance had been made, lowered the window and replaced the catch. He then rummaged about the writing table until he found a specimen of Lord Louis' signature. This he carefully stowed away in his breast pocket. After which he crossed the hall a second time, opened the front door and closed it silently behind his retreating form.

Neither then nor afterwards was anybody aware that his visit had been made.

. . . . . .

At breakfast, the following morning, Lord Louis made certain arrangements which Mr. Yorke was to carry out should the necessity arise. At nine o'clock the car conveyed them to the station. The barrier was closed but, being well known to the railway officials, Lord Louis had no difficulty in persuading the collector to allow them to pass to the waiting train.

"You undersand what to do should Kineagie appear?" Lord Louis questioned.

"Quite," returned the other.

"There is no other train until eleven-twenty. We must prevent him from travelling by this one at all costs."

"Rely on me," replied Mr. Yorke, and turned into the platform waiting-room, where he could watch without being seen. Lord Louis went forward and entered the compartment next to the engine. A short while later the barrier was opened and people began

to take their seats. About two minutes before the scheduled time for starting Mr. Yorke's vigil was rewarded, and he espied the bunched-up figure of Eden Kineagie hurrying down the platform. Mr. Yorke carefully noted the carriage he entered, and then transferred his attentions to the guard. He waited until the doors had been closed, and the guard was raising his green flag, before leaping from concealment. Straight as a die he ran to Mr. Kineagie's carriage and flinging open the door cried breathlessly:

"Mr. Kineagie!"

"Well?" retorted that individual as the train began to move from the platform.

"Do you want the picture of the child?" he gasped.

"Yes. Get in," cried Kineagie.

"No. You get out," he insisted. "If you don't you'll lose it."

Mr. Kineagie hesitated, and a porter shouted: "Stand away there."

"Too late," cried Mr. Yorke, and began to close the door.

"Too late be damned," yelled Kineagie, and sprang to the platform. "Now then, what's it all about?"

But Mr. Yorke was so put to it for breath as to be unable to reply until the train was well out of reach. Then his answer was somewhat in the nature of a surprise.

"I fear," he said, "I am the cause of your losing the train."

"That don't matter," returned the other, "if you have got the picture."

"But I haven't," Mr. Yorke blandly replied. "I merely asked if you wanted it. Ah, see! There is our friend Lord Louis waving from his carriage window."

There followed a period in which Mr. Eden Kineagie spoke his mind with alarming frankness, and was warned by a station official that unless he modified his language unpleasant consequences would inevitably ensue.

. . . . . .

Lord Louis alighted at Wells, and, taking a cab, drove to Gideon street. He did not instruct the man to stop when they came to "La Peruse," but merely noted the agent's address on the board before the house. Having acquired this information, he told the driver to proceed to Messrs. Margetson and Knight, Land and Estate Agents, in the High Street. The distance was not great, and in less than a quarter of an hour the cab had returned and deposited him at the door of his late cousin's abode, armed with an order to view, bearing his incognito of Mr. Clifton.

Griffe, who admitted his lordship, appeared to be in a more even frame of mind than on the day before. He expressed his readiness to show Mr. Clifton over the house and hoped it might suit his requirements. Leading the way from room to room,

he extolled the virtues of each during the inspection. Lord Louis made a careful survey of the walls, but beyond a few oleographs and valueless engravings his search was unrewarded.

They had now arrived at the top floor and still nothing had been revealed.

"There are just a couple of maids' rooms here," said Griffee, "and this is a cupboard."

"Ah," said Lord Louis, brightening up, "cupboards interest me very much. But the door, I perceive, is locked."

"Yes," replied Griffe, with a trace of hesitation, "and somehow I have mislaid the key."

"Dear me, what a pity," said Lord Louis. "Couldn't you find it?"

"No, but it's just an ordinary affair," retorted Griffe. "Now if you will step down to the basement you'll have seen everything."

Very reluctantly Lord Louis allowed himself to be drawn away from the closed cupboard and led below.

"There's as good a kitchen as you'd find anywhere," said Griffe, "and a morning-room which I use for myself."

Lord Louis inspected the kitchen, and made a few enquiries about the stove. He was then admitted to the morning-room, which evidenced signs of its owner's habits. It was extremely untidy, and a number of empty bottles were assembled beneath the barred window. Upon the table were the remnants of a breakfast: a loaf of bread, some grubby-looking

butter, the spinal vertebrae of a bloater upon a plate, and a glass still crusted with the foam from Griffe's morning draught. A sickening reek of tobacco, fish and stale beer pervaded the atmosphere, and Lord Louis was consumed with desire to rid his nostrils of the taint of it. Before going, however, he turned his attention to the walls. It was evident the room had not been papered for many years, as all trace of the pattern had long since vanished in a uniform, yellowy brown. Suddenly he experienced a shock. Immediately over the mantelpiece was an oblong patch in which the original design of the wallpaper was clearly visible. There could be no doubt that a picture had been recently removed which must have been suspended there for a very long time. Although Lord Louis could only guess at the size of this space, he realized it could not differ greatly from the dimensions of the Reynolds canvas depicting Lady Anne's work-basket.

Griffe, who had been making some pretence of putting the room in order, turned at this moment and followed the direction of Lord Louis' gaze. Being possessed of a slow order of intelligence he did not grasp the significance of his visitor's pre-occupation.

"What are you staring at?" he enquired.

Lord Louis came to his senses with a start, and wheeling round, pointed an accusing finger at Griffe.

"Griffe," he said, taking a leap in the dark, "you are a scoundrel!"

"What do you mean?" cried Griffe.

"You are a scoundrel," repeated Lord Louis. "I give you two minutes to bring me the picture which hung there, or face the consequences."

Griffe fell back a pace. "Don't know what you're talking about," he stammered.

"You will gain nothing by prevarication," continued Lord Louis, inexorably. "The picture is in the cupboard upstairs. Fetch it at once."

"However did you know that?" exclaimed Griffe, hopelessly committing himself.

"I am Lord Louis Lewis," came the reply, in accents which would have graced a melodrama, "and I know everything."

"I didn't know it was worth anything," whined Griffe. "I wouldn't believe my old master when he said it was a good 'un."

Lord Louis relaxed a trifle. "Produce it now," he said, "and I will not be hard on you; but fail to do so——"

Griffe did not wait for the end of the sentence, but muttering, "I'll get it," slunk from the room.

As the door closed Lord Louis' face broke into a smile.

"One to me, Mr. Kineagie," he murmured to himself.

Two minutes later Lady Anne's work-basket and tambour frame, as rendered by the hand of Sir Joshua Reynolds, left the precincts of "La Peruse" under the sheltering arm of Lord Louis Lewis.

Mr. Griffe had another caller during the day in the person of Mr. Eden Kineagie, who, following his

'I give you two minutes to bring me the picture which hung there, or face the consequences''

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usual custom, lost no time in beating about the bush.

"If you've got a picture here, of a work-basket and a bit of embroidery, I'll give you a couple of hundred for it," he said.

Whereupon Mr. Griffe reviled Mr. Kineagie for not coming the day before, and, calling heaven to witness that his luck was out, slammed the door in that gentleman's face.

Mr. Kineagie mastered his disappointment to the best of his ability, and caught the first train to London, where he began to prosecute a vigorous search for the missing child.

Lord Louis took advantage of his presence in Wells to call upon an acquaintance and did not return to his native town until after dark. On arriving at Bristol he took a cab, which conveyed him and his precious burden up the long ascent from the station. About a hundred and fifty yards from his destination the horse stumbled and fell and, as it showed no inclination to rise, Lord Louis paid the fare and completed his journey on foot.

There were two gates to Bruton House, and a short drive with a circular clump of bushes in the centre. Lord Louis entered by the first gate, and had taken a few paces down the drive, when, in the light of the arc lamp, he became aware of a covered motor van drawn up at his front door.

The side of the van was decorated with the words, J. DORNEY. PICTURES RESTORED AND CLEANED. Rendered in very new white paint. The fact that there was no indication of where Mr. Dorney hailed

from struck Lord Louis as unusual. Some inner feeling warned him that all was not as it should be, so, instead of proceeding, he halted under the shadow of the bushes and awaited events.

In the doorway appeared Badger, his butler, and a man, and between them they bore the portrait of Lady Anne Sefton. Together they placed it in the van, the man covering it over with a piece of sacking. Then Badger spoke.

"I suppose it *is* all right," he said.

"Of course," replied the man. "You saw his lordship's signature on the order to take it away."

"Yes, I did," assented Badger.

"And you say yourself," pursued the man, "you heard him tell his friend it would have to be cleaned."

"That's true," Badger admitted. "But I'm sorry his lordship isn't here, all the same."

"So am I," said the man, giving the engine a turn over and mounting to the driver's seat.

Lord Louis was dumbfounded, and his first thought was to spring forward and rescue his property. Then a subtler possibility stole through his brain, and, without pausing to consider the wisdom of the action, he thrust the canvas he was carrying into the bushes and skirted round to the other side of the clump.

"Goo' night," cried the man.

"Good-night to you," said Badger, and closed the door.

The man engaged the low gear, and the motor moved forward. Lord Louis waited until it had

passed him, then, without attracting attention, sprang lightly on to the tail-board. To his great relief, he found the inside of the vehicle was screened from the driver by the hood. He drew up his legs and settled down for the journey. They passed through the gates, turned sharp to the left and bowled away briskly into the night.

Lord Louis fully expected the van would draw up in some remote part of the town, but herein he was mistaken. The driver made for the London road, and then increased the speed. In twenty minutes the city of Bristol had become a mere twinkle of lights in the distance, and they were rattling along at a round pace in the open country.

"Well," said Lord Louis to himself, "it looks as if I am in for a tour. I may as well make myself as comfortable as possible."

In the far end of the van he found two petrol tins and a quantity of sacking, and as the night was fresh, he wrapped himself up and lay down. Mile after mile passed. He took out his luminous dialed watch and examined the time. It was nearly ten o'clock. They had left the London road now, and were travelling, so far as he could judge, in a south-easterly direction. He tried hard to imagine what destination they were bound for, but without arriving at a conclusion. Lord Louis felt a curious sense of inertia stealing over him, a desire to close his eyes and rest. Something in the even hum of the engine was slowly acting as a soporific. Obviously it was imperative he should not fall asleep, so to keep

himself awake he attempted to translate what he could remember of his conversation with Griffe into the Greek tongue. As his knowledge of this language was very slender the effort was unsuccessful and greatly increased his fatigue. A few minutes later he had slipped quiety into unconsciousness.

He awoke suddenly, as the vehicle drew up, with a start. Cursing himself for his stupidity, he drew back to the extreme end of the van and covered himself over with the sacking. He heard the driver descend and rap twice at a door, which was immediately opened, and a voice, evidently that of an old man, saying: "Have you got it?" "Sure," came the reply. "Give us a hand and we'll take it in." "No, no," said the other; "let it bide there. I've a fancy that we'll move the best stuff to-night to the other end. People are a bit too neighbourly, hereabouts, for my liking." "Right you are," said Lord Louis' driver; "but give us a bit of supper first." "It's all set out in the front room," the older man returned. "Come in and don't be long about it." As the two passed through the door Lord Louis heard the younger man remark: "Ran out of petrol at the corner of the street here. Couldn't have gone another yard without filling up." And as there were two unopened tins in the back of the van Lord Louis breathed a prayer of gratitude that the house had not been half a mile further off.

When the door had closed behind them Lord Louis crept out from his hiding place. Having come so far he was determined to go through with the adven-

ture to the end. Moreover, he had a curious conviction that the house contained some mystery in which he was concerned. Remembering the words that supper was laid in the front room, he wisely considered that the back of the house would be the safest point to investigate. The street in which he found himself was composed of small red brick dwellings, with a narrow passage between every two of them. Up this passage Lord Louis made his way and debouched into a small garden at the rear. There was a room which overlooked this, wherein a light was visible shining through the lowered blind. He cautiously approached and peeped through a crevice between the sash and the blind. The room itself was innocent of furniture, but, leaning against the walls, were a number of canvases covered over with white cloths. One of these was larger than the rest, and Lord Louis' heart almost stopped beating when he saw the shape of it. It was very narrow for its length.

"I'm going to look at that picture if I die in the attempt," he said. Thereupon he set about to find a means of entering. On his right was a small wash-house built out from what was presumably the kitchen. This wash-house boasted a window about fourteen inches square. By the greatest good fortune the catch was unfastened. Lord Louis mentally weighed the chances of squeezing through this aperture, then, taking his courage in both hands, he started to do the deed head first.

The task was not an easy one, and when eventually

he landed face downwards on the floor it was not without having caused considerable damage to both his clothes and feelings. However, these considerations did not oppress him, and he hastened on tip-toe to investigate the mystery of the back room. The door was ajar, relieving him of the danger of making a noise in opening it. Going straight to the tall canvas he removed its wrappings, and there, before him, was the figure of little Philip Sefton, leaning vainly forward as though seeking the mother from whose side he had been cleft.

The sound of voices in the adjoining room aroused him to the necessity for formulating some plan of action.

He stepped into the hall and listened to what was passing there.

"If we could get the rest of the picture then we could talk," came the voice of the older man. "It's twenty-five years since I lifted that child's portrait and much good it's been to me. You are sure the woman's been cut down too?"

"You can see for yourself if you slip out and look," replied the driver of the motor.

"Bad luck," said the other. "We're not much better off with the two than we were with the one."

"You're never satisfied. You'd grumble if the gates of heaven were dropped into your lap."

At this point Lord Louis returned to the other room. It was clear he had only two persons to deal with, and he rubbed his chin as he considered what would be the best method of attack.

Then Fate played an unexpected move. In crossing the room Lord Louis brought his head into violent collision with the gas chandelier, suspended from the ceiling. As a result two of the globes fell to the floor with the sound of an exploding bomb.

"That's done it," said Lord Louis to himself.

From the other room came a cry of, "What's that? Police?"

Instantly an idea flashed into the peer's brain, and, raising his voice, he shouted in a constabulary manner:

"Edwards, you clumsy fool! Get round to the front door, Parsons. Quick and lively."

There was the sound of the window being hurriedly lifted in the front room. "This way," cried the voice of the younger man. "Start up the car," yelled the older. "No petrol. We must run for it." Then came the sound of feet running hard on the pavement outside. Lord Louis arrived at the front door in time to see two shadowy forms disappear round the corner.

"Well," he said, "that was an easy victory," and returned to the house. He then sat down to a critical survey of the position of affairs. "Our friends are clearly men of dishonest habit," he argued. "I doubt if they have any proprietary right to the works of art which adorn the house. Shall I warn the police, or shall I not?" The upshot of his reasoning was that he would leave the police to make the discovery for themselves. He then returned to the back room, and, picking up the picture of little

Philip, brought it out and placed it beside that of his mother in the van. The next move was to replenish the tank, which he did from the two tins of petrol at the back. He then returned to the house and extinguished all the lights, closed the windows and front door, and climbing into the driver's seat drove carefully away. He hailed a late wayfarer at the corner of the street and enquired the name of the town. Receiving an answer that the man was "a stranger here," he took the first wide road, leading to the West Countrie, and was lost to view.

Lord Louis and the borrowed van arrived at Bruton House in the grey of dawn. Badger, who had sat up the whole night anxiously awaiting his master's return, greeted him with a combination of delight and astonishment. Lord Louis was too tired to give any explanation of his doings, but together they carried the precious canvases into the study. He also rescued the painting of the work-basket from the bushes in the drive. He then wrote a wire to Mr. Kineagie asking him to call at his earliest convenience to inspect the picture of the child, and after instructing Badger to have it despatched as soon as the office was opened, retired to bed.

He came down to breakfast at twelve o'clock, to find Mr. Russell Yorke awaiting him in high excitement at the news Badger had impaired.

In the late afternoon Mr. Eden Kineagie put in an appearance. Between them, Mr. Yorke and Lord Louis, had taken the canvases from their stretchers and laid them in correct relation to each other on

the library floor. Thither they conducted Mr. Kineagie. Mr. Yorke fully expected some display of violence, but in this he was at fault. For a long time Kineagie said nothing at all, and then, in a voice which might well have come from a lover, he remarked:

"Oh, you beautiful — beautiful thing." Then, turning to Lord Louis, "Tell your man to bring in the case from my cab." A few moments later the portrait of Lord Sefton was standing next to that of his wife, with a greater tranquillity than had ever existed in their mortal careers.

Lord Louis was much affected by Mr. Kineagie's sporting acceptance of Fate's handiwork and remarked upon it in most cordial terms.

"Pooh," replied that gentleman. "A bargain's a bargain. Yours was amateur's luck. Will you let me have the picture put together for you? I know the only man that could do it. P'raps you don't trust me though?"

"I trust you implicitly," responded Lord Louis, and walked over to his writing table. When he returned he handed the little man a cheque for four thousand pounds.

To his great surprise Mr. Kineagie tore it up in small piece.

"I collect pictures," he said, "not cheques." He rummaged in his pocket and flung Lady Anne's diary on the table, and, with a muttered "Good-bye," banged out of the house.

. . . . . .

As a salve to his conscience Lord Louis put an advertisement in the papers to the effect that he would be pleased to reward the owner of the picture of the child without any hands; but, oddly enough, he received no reply. He was not a little embarrassed by the continued presence of the motor van, bearing the name of "J. Dorney. Pictures Restored and Cleaned." But as no one came forward to claim the vehicle he used it for the conveyance of luggage to and from the station, and sent its equivalent value to the Society for Carrying the Gospel to the Heart of the Congo.

People who have been privileged to see the Reynolds Group declare it to be the finest example of that master's work in the kingdom, and even experts have found it hard to believe that for over a hundred years it existed as four isolated sections of the now perfect whole.

CHAPTER III

A LITTLE PRESSURE

PIG-HEADEDNESS, or, to use the more polite word, obstinacy, is a vice only discernible in others. We are never conscious of it as a personal failing.

In support of this statement is the case of Sir John and Lady Sedgewick.

According to Sir John, his wife was the most pig-headed woman in the kingdom, and, oddly enough, she held precisely identical views regarding him. The net result was that, instead of adopting a policy of give and take, they adhered to a principle of take and take, and in consequence neither attained anything.

Very occasionally, by the process of checkmating some firm resolve which one of the conflicting parties might have set his or her heart upon, and by only allowing it to proceed subject to a surrender in some other direction, they got their own way.

The classic example was the controversy regarding the Dutch garden.

It had long been Sir John's intention to lay out a Dutch garden in a deep hollow of the Chestnut Avenue, at a point about two hundred yards from the house.

For no particular reason Lady Sedgewick threw out the bill. Had Sir John cared to proceed, in defiance of her wishes, there was nothing to prevent it.

The estate was his, and he was entitled to do upon it whatsoever he desired.

There existed, however, a tacit understanding between them never to take by violence what they had failed to achieve by argument.

Sir John applied the whole of his ingenuity to carrying the scheme through, but without avail. Lady Sedgewick turned a deaf ear to threats and entreaties alike, and acting on the principle of "I have said you are not going to," would not budge an inch from her original attitude. If Sir John wanted a Dutch garden there were plenty of places without ruining the grass of the Chestnut Avenue.

Generally speaking, Lady Sedgewick was not particularly interested in the grounds, the only exception being her bower of roses. This spot was her especial care and delight, and she lavished upon it both capital and labour. She never tired of showing the blooms which her own hands had nurtured, or of conceiving fresh plans for displaying them to greater advantage.

It was while walking in this retreat that the idea came into Sir John's head. The discussion upon his project had taken a more than usually vitriolic turn that morning, and he was still smarting from his wife's verbal thrusts.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, came the Big Idea, and Sir John chuckled to himself with unholy glee.

Calling one of the gardeners, he addressed him as follows:

"Fisher," he said, "I have decided to lay out my

Dutch garden here. Get your men together and start levelling the ground straight away. Clear out all this rubbish first," and with a wave of the hand he indicated the surrounding rose bushes. Fisher gasped with astonishment. "Look sharp and do what I say," continued Sir John. "Your mistress will be here in a few minutes to see how you are getting on." He turned and walked towards the house.

About a quarter of an hour later Lady Sedgewick was astonished to find the whole outdoor staff congregated in her rose garden, rolling up their sleeves and displaying many preliminary activities. On learning the nature of their intentions she was justly horrified. Bidding the men do nothing till her return she hastened to find the author of the outrage. When eventually she ran him to earth he was engaged in the pacific pursuit of fly-tying, a childlike smile playing over his features.

"Ah, my dear," said he, without giving her a chance to address him, "you were right in saying there are better places than the Avenue for my Dutch garden. I have told the men to start work in another part of the grounds."

Lady Sedgewick's reply is not on record, but the presence of a Dutch garden, on elaborate lines, situated in the middle of the Chestnut Avenue, points to an understanding having been arrived at.

Sir John and Lady Sedgewick's union had been blessed by one child, a girl, and they were naturally unwilling to sacrifice her to any but the most appropriate suitor. Her hand had been sought in vain

by many eligible men of the county, but until the arrival of the Hon. Cedric Milwood, no one had achieved even the slightest success.

Cedric was a bright, happy-go-lucky young fellow, with a small vocabulary and not a care in the world. From infancy upwards his lot had been cast among pleasant places and pleasant people. Good-looking, well-born and rich, he was, in every sense, a desirable partner for any maid. He openly adored Miss Sarah Sedgewick from the moment of their introduction, which took place at a ball given in honour of her twenty-first birthday. It is recorded that quite early in the evening he induced her to walk on the terrace, where his feelings became so acute that he took her to his breast and kissed her fervently. Miss Sarah, instead of upbraiding him for his temerity, kissed him back with an equal fervour and a like disregard for convention.

They cut several dances and conducted themselves after the fashion of lovers all the world over. The miasma of the night so revolutionized the Hon. Cedric's vocabulary that he became quite poetic and called Sarah a "Clinker" and a "Corker" with an intonation which imparted fresh lustre to the spoken words.

It is doubtful if the ballroom would have seen them again that evening had they not been run to earth by a search party, headed by Fifi, Lady Sedgewick's infinitesimal muff-hound, and flanked by the lady herself and Sir John. Fifi, whose nose would have done credit to a greater example of her kind, smelt

them out and betrayed their presence by shrill barking of an imperative order.

Neither the Hon. Cedric nor Miss Sarah made the slightest effort to escape. They stood their ground and avowed undying affection for each other.

Sarah's mother was in favour of the match from the very first, but Sir John, probably on account of his wife's ready acquiescence, was disposed to view the matter in a less conclusive light.

"I know nothing against you, my boy," he said. "On the other hand, I know very little of you."

Cedric protested that he was a devil of a good fellow, and would make Sarah the most devoted husband in the world. In conclusion, he said: "If you have any doubts about me, I am sure my uncle, Lord Louis Lewis, would give me a character."

"I like to form my own judgment of a man," remarked Sir John. "There's no objection to you and Sarah having an understanding, but, for the present, I can't permit you to regard yourselves as engaged. Come down next week for the shooting, and we'll see how we rub along together."

"I think, John," said Lady Sedgewick, "it is rather unkind of you to put obstacles in the way of the young people's happiness."

"I am not putting obstacles," he retorted, testily.

"It practically amounts to that," answered his wife. "You know how irritable you are at shooting parties. There is something about them which causes you to find fault with all your guests."

"Absurd!" exclaimed Sir John. "Not a vestige

of truth in it," and he tapped his foot with exasperation upon the gravel.

It is curious how dependent on trifles are the great things in life. If Sir John had not tapped his foot Fifi would never have chosen that moment to take offence and fix her sharp little teeth in the Baronet's ankle, and, in all probability, Sarah's and the Hon. Cedric's engagement would have been consecrated then and there. As it was, the pain caused by the bite drove all other considerations from Sir John's mind. He gave vent to a loud cry of pain, and, forgetful of the feminine element by which the company was adorned, swore loudly that nothing less than Fifi's life would atone for the act of violence she had committed.

Knowing her father's temper, Sarah very wisely withdrew the Hon. Cedric to a more remote part of the terrace, leaving her parents to have it out according to their habit.

"Rotten luck that little beast getting hold of your Guv'nor's leg jus' then," commented Cedric.

"Yes, it was," said Sarah. "He won't talk about anything but Fifi for weeks now."

"That so?" he replied; then, being rather economical in his use of words, repeated, "Rotten luck."

During the week that followed, before the shooting party, Fifi was the all-absorbing topic. Sir John's growing hatred of the dog was the signal for Lady Sedgewick's increased adoration. Not a meal passed without verbal fuel being added to the fire of Sir John's displeasure.

"One of these days," he said, "I'll shoot the little brute with my own hand and be done with it. A cur like that is a disgrace to a sporting household. The whole breed ought to be exterminated," and Fifi, who happened to be in the room, set up a falsetto howl of derision.

Under these trying circumstances rational discussion on the subject of Sarah's engagement was out of the question. Accordingly Sarah approached her mother with the suggestion that it might be as well, if she held her daughter's happiness at heart, to send Fifi away and restore the peace of the household. Lady Sedgewick would have nothing to do with such an idea. She argued that it was good for Sir John to put up with things he didn't like, and if he didn't like them he could put up with them.

"Besides," she concluded, "I love little Fifi, and she shall not be sacrificed for the sake of an absurd whim."

"But Fifi did bite father," said Sarah, tentatively.

"And quite right too," responded Lady Sedgewick. "I have often felt disposed to do so myself."

Having failed in this direction, Sarah determined to tackle her sire. This she did on the morning when the Hon. Cedric was expected to arrive. She sought Sir John in his study, where he was perusing the *Morning Post*. Being experienced in these matters, she did not open the conversation, but sat herself on a chair facing his, blinked her eyes and protruded her dewy lower lip. Presently Sir John laid aside his paper and took stock of her equipment of sorrow.

"What's the matter with you, Sally?" he asked.

"I'm very miserable," replied the disconsolate one.

"How's that?" he demanded. "Thought your young man was coming today."

Sarah brightened perceptibly. "Oh, Dad," she exclaimed, "then you consent?"

"I didn't say so," he responded. "But if he sizes up all right during the week, perhaps I will."

"Then you promise to do all you can to like him," cried Sarah, jumping up and throwing an arm about his neck. "And you won't stop in a bad temper because mother refuses to let Fifi go, will you?"

Sir John's brow clouded. "Your mother's a fool about that dog," he said. "The world would be a different place if women weren't so infernally pig-headed." And having started on his favourite subject he developed it *ad exhaustum.*

The first two days after Cedric's arrival passed smoothly enough. Under the guidance of Sarah he developed rare qualities of tact, and contrived to keep in the good books of both his host and hostess. He caressed Fifi in the presence of Lady Sedgewick and abused Fifi when his lot was cast with Sir John. Moreover, he gained the latter's respect with his prowess with the gun. He was a natural shot, picking his birds and bringing them down with ease and accuracy. Sir John was a stickler for correctness in anything pertaining to field sports, and it was a great achievement to have won his admiration in that direction. Cedric began to feel that success was assured, and in consequence fell upon careless ways.

It chanced, on the morning of the third day, that he found himself alone in the drawing-room with Fifi, and, without thinking what he was doing, picked up the little animal, and taking her upon his knee rubbed her tiny pointed nose. As ill-luck would have it Sir John chose that very moment to enter the room. He halted in amazement at the sight which confronted him.

"Well, I'm hanged," said Sir John. "Nursing that dog?"

"Yes," replied Cedric thoughtlessly. "Corkin' little fellah, ain't she?" The words were scarcely out before he realized the enormity of his offence. Rising to his feet and sweeping Fifi aside, he made a feeble attempt to carry the thing off. "Rotten sort of dog, really," he stammered. "Awful rotten sort. A down-right rotter, that's what she is. Snappy little rotter."

"Hum!" said Sir John, eyeing him coldly. "I hope your affection for human beings is not so variable as it is for animals," and with these words he turned and walked from the room.

Cedric could have kicked himself for his stupidity and was so preoccupied all the morning that he missed seven easy shots in succession. As he had been given the best place in the line Sir John was not backward with acrimonious comments, which so disordered the Hon. Cedric's balance that he committed an awful mistake. A bird had risen before Sir John and, although it was obviously not his shot, the Hon. Cedric upped with his gun and loosed off. Not a feather

was displaced and the bird continued his course, flying low over the line. Then Cedric, forgetful of all the laws of a properly conducted shoot, fired his second barrel as the bird was crossing Sir John's head. It fell like a stone, hitting the baronet full in the face.

"Damn you, sir," spluttered that gentleman, pulling a handful of feathers from his mouth. "Damn you. Don't you know better than to fire down the line?"

"I am most rottenly sorry, Sir John," stammered the Hon. Cedric, approaching his host with gun levelled in direct line with that gentleman's waistcoat.

"Don't point that thing at me," screamed Sir John. "'Pon my soul, you're a danger to the community!"

This announcement so agitated the wretched Cedric that he dropped his gun altogether, and in stooping to recover it allowed a cascade of cartridges to flow from his bag to a rain-filled plough furrow.

"Look at you now," exclaimed Sir John. "You are only fit to stop in the boudoir and play with lap-dogs."

"I've never done such a thing before," stammered Cedric, labouring with the words.

"And you won't get a chance of doing it again," retorted the other. "One thing I never forgive is firing down the line."

Realizing that nothing was to be gained by prolonging the discussion the Hon. Cedric shouldered his gun and walked dejectedly down the hill to the house.

On his way he met Miss Sarah, who was coming to join the guns at lunch.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked.

"I'm a silly ass," he replied, and recounted the recent events in his own simple style. Little Miss Sarah was horrified.

"Oh, dear!" she cried. "Father'll never forgive that. Why, why were you so stupid?"

"I don't know," said Cedric mournfully. "I suppose because I'm such a silly ass."

"I must plead for you my very hardest," said Sarah, her big eyes brimming. "But it'll be a frightful business. Oh, Cedric, I almost wish I didn't love you such a lot."

Upon which the Hon. Cedric dropped his gun for the second time, and took her in his arms.

"I don't deserve it," he murmured. Then, lest she should have any lingering doubts on the point, repeated previous criticisms upon his disabilities.

Miss Sarah was right when she said that it would be a frightful business. In vain she begged her sire to overlook Cedric's mistake, but his only response was reiterated abuse of people "who shoot down the line."

"If you think I'm going to trust my little Sally to a man of that sort," he said, "you are very far wrong."

Cedric, from his corner of the room, kept up a running fire of apology and self-reproach, but to no avail.

Then Lady Sedgewick began, and for once in her life very nearly won the day. With astonishing tact she informed Cedric that Sir John was quite right to be annoyed. His carelessness might well have robbed her of the most indulgent husband in the world. Yes, yes, she understood that Cedric was agitated on account of his brush with Sir John earlier in the morning. Certainly Sir John was a man whose ire any one might be alarmed at causing. She was the first to admit it. Here Sir John cleared his throat and tried to look very severe.

"But," Lady Sedgewick continued, "there is no excuse for neglecting proper precautions with a gun and if Sir John withholds his sanction to your engagement you have no one to blame but yourself."

The Hon. Cedric remained silent, realizing that the matter was entirely out of his hands, and more likely to develop favourably if he left the talking to others.

Sir John, who was not a little flattered by his wife's address, rose and took a position before the fire. The omen was good, and Miss Sarah allowed a sigh of relief to escape her. When her father meant to sit tight he invariably did so from his chair. When he rose it implied that the other side stood a chance of winning.

Then it was that one of those accursed tricks of fate occurred by which the whole course of people's lives are changed.

Fifi, who had been concealed beneath her mistress's armchair, suddenly became aware of the proximity of

her persecutor's ankles, and leapt forth to engage them in battle.

"Damn the dog!" shouted Sir John, and snatching up a cushion flung it at Fifi, enveloping her beneath its billowy expanse.

Lady Sedgewick darted forward and rescued her pet, ruffled and indignant.

"Oh, you cruel, cruel wretch!" she exclaimed.

"Now, see her," said Sir John, and he was very angry indeed. "This is the last straw. If you want me to give my consent to Sarah's engagement I'll give it — on one condition. That dog goes out of the house first thing to-morrow morning — and never returns."

Lady Sedgewick confronted her husband with eyes of steel.

"If that is your condition, John," she said, "I absolutely and finally decline to accept it."

"Very good," he replied, "there is nothing more to be said."

And the Hon. Cedric Milwood kissed Miss Sarah "good-bye" twenty-seven times and left for Bristol, with a broken heart, by the twenty-seven minutes past nine express.

. . . . . .

Some two days later Lord Louis Lewis, whilst being shaved, was somewhat astonished when a very dishevelled young man burst into his dressing-room and flung himself, full length, into an easy chair.

"I am the most miserable wretch in the world,"

exclaimed the young man, "and if you can't help me I shall fling myself under a train."

"Dear me!" said Lord Louis. "We must try to avert that. At the same time," he added, "perhaps it would be as well, if your narrative is emotional in character, to delay the telling until this delicate operation had been performed."

"I can wait," said the Hon. Cedric.

"Good," remarked his uncle. "If you care to ring the bell and order some refreshment, pray do."

Cedric shook his head. "Drink is no use," he muttered, "I've tried it."

"As bad as all that?" said Lord Louis, and motioned the barber to proceed. His shave completed, Lord Louis dressed with care; then led the way to his study.

"In spite of your remark," said he, "I fancy a little sherry and bitters would harm neither of us. Speaking for myself, I have often found its influence beneficial."

When the drinks had been ordered and consumed Lord Louis leant back in his chair to give full attention to his nephew's tale of woe.

The Hon. Cedric told the story with characteristic inadequacy. Indeed, had Lord Louis not been a man of considerable discernment it is doubtful if he would have made head or tail of it.

"One thing is evident," he said, at the conclusion, "your success or failure to win Miss Sarah's hand is dependent on whether or no the dog Fifi remains."

"That's the whole 'do' in a nutshell," replied Cedric.

"And what exactly," continued Lord Louis, "do you wish me to do?"

"I don't know," came the reply. "I thought you could talk 'em over, perhaps. You can do that sort of thing. I'm no earthly good when it comes to a jaw. Now, you can talk the hind leg off a donkey."

"It is good of you to say so," replied Lord Louis, with a smile, "although I confess I have never made the experiment."

"When'll you go?" demanded Cedric.

"I could take the car and drive over this afternoon."

"You're a sport, I swear you are," cried the young man, enthusiastically.

"Rest assured that I shall do my utmost," said Lord Louis. "But guard against entertaining too high hopes. Sir John's obstinacy is as notorious as his wife's."

"Shall I come with you?" enquired Cedric.

"It would be better not, I fancy," was the reply.

About two hours later Lord Louis' car passed the lodge gates of Sir John's estate. He had not proceeded very far up the drive, however, before observing the form of little Miss Sarah walking disconsolately towards him. Instructing the chauffeur to stop, he dismounted and approached her. Raising his hat, he said:

"Am I right in believing you are Miss Sarah Sedgewick?"

"Yes," said Sarah, regarding him doubtfully.

"My name is Lord Louis Lewis," he continued, "and although I cannot claim any great intimacy with your parents, I have had the pleasure of meeting them several times."

"Oh, you are Cedric's uncle," cried Sarah, brightening perceptibly.

"I am," replied Lord Louis. "I have driven over in the hope of inducing Sir John to regard my nephew's engagement to you less unfavourably."

"You darling!" exclaimed Sarah, and, greatly to his surprise, kissed him on the point of the chin.

"My dear young lady!" he expostulated, smilingly.

"I couldn't help it," said Sarah. "If you knew how utterly wretched I have been I am sure you would forgive me."

"I do so readily," replied Lord Louis. "And I trust that the confidence you have shown will not prove misplaced. Now, will you advise me what course of action I had best pursue."

Miss Sarah rubbed her little nose. "It all depends on mother," she said. "If she refuses to give up Fifi nothing can be done. Oh, can't you wring the horrid little thing's neck?"

Lord Louis smiled. "I fancy it would be unwise," he said.

"P'raps it would," Sarah answered. "But you will think of something, won't you?"

"I shall leave no stone unturned," replied Lord

Louis. "I feel that my own happiness is at stake."

"And you'll let me know what happens?"

"Meet me here in an hour's time," said he, "and you shall hear everything."

"All right," said Sarah. "I'll make a little fire and we'll have tea together under the trees. I know you are going to succeed." And she favoured Lord Louis with a smile which made him feel exactly eighteen years old.

Lord Louis sighed. "My nephew is a very fortunate young man," said he, and raised her fingers to his lips.

On arrival at the house Lord Louis was informed that Sir John was walking up some hedgerows with a gun. Yes, Lady Sedgewick was at home and, if his lordship would care to wait, would doubtless be pleased to see him in a few moments.

Lord Louis was shown into the large drawing-room, and, after presenting him with an illustrated paper, the footman retired, leaving him wearing his heavy ulster, not having been invited to remove it.

Lord Louis was not sorry for this brief respite, for, as he confessed to himself, he was relying solely upon his ever-ready wit to bring about an understanding.

Musing deeply he moved toward the fire. Without actually looking at it he was conscious of a comfortable arm-chair in his near vicinity, into which, with careless freedom, he allowed himself to drop.

Simultaneously there was a cry — he experienced a sharp pain and heard a gasp — guessed he had been bitten — and knew he had retaliated, crushingly.

For a moment he sat there, petrified, then setting his teeth he rose and turned to inspect the damage.

On the seat of the chair lay the body of Fifi — her soul having departed for that tribunal where the spirits of dogs are judged according to their earthly deeds.

"Well," reflected Lord Louis, "that's that — and how the deuce I shall explain it I have no idea."

Then, of a sudden, came the sound of footsteps on the parquetry outside. The need for action was imperative. It is curious how a latent criminal instinct exists alike in the best and worst of us. Lord Louis had never committed a murder before, and, consequently, had no previous experience to draw upon as to the best method for concealing a body. To his everlasting discredit, be it said, he did not hesitate for an instant, but snatching up his victim thrust it, unceremoniously, into the outer pocket of his motor coat.

When Lady Sedgewick entered the room some three seconds later he was seated on the site of the recent tragedy, listlessly turning over the pages of the *Sporting and Dramatic.*

His hostess greeted him graciously.

"My dear Lord Louis," she said, "this is a pleasure. I take it you are here to plead the cause of your charming nephew, Cedric."

"That is so," replied the peer. "The boy's happiness concerns me deeply. I very much hope to persuade you ——"

Lady Sedgewick interposed. "The matter rests

entirely with Sir John," she said. "As you know, my feelings are most favourable to the match. There is nothing I would not do in order to bring it about."

"Even to the sacrifice of your pet?" ventured Lord Louis.

Lady Sedgewick frowned. "No," she said. "That is a length to which I cannot go. To do so would betray the greatest weakness."

"I beg you to reconsider that decision," pleaded Lord Louis. "Surely your daughter's happiness is of greater moment than the possession of this dog?"

Lady Sedgewick was polite but firm. "You do not understand," she said. "If I gave up Fifi I should forfeit, with her, much of my own self-respect. My husband is a man whose obstinacy is a byword. For his sake I cannot allow him to have his own way. Such a course would inevitably increase the perplexing problem of how to manage him properly. By the way," she added, glancing round the room, "I wonder what has become of Fifi? She is generally to be found here when there is a fire."

Lord Louis mastered a powerful desire to bolt, and remarked, as he adjusted the flap of his right-hand coat pocket, how the love of a fire was common to all domestic animals.

"Would you mind ringing that bell," Lady Sedgewick requested.

Lord Louis did so, and Lady Sedgewick asked the footman if he had seen Fifi.

"No, m' lady," was the reply. "She was in this room before I admitted his lordship."

"If that had been so I should probably have seen her," said Lord Louis, in a steady voice.

"Find her, Warlock, and bring her to me," Lady Sedgewick ordered. Then, addressing Lord Louis, "Won't you let him take your coat? You must be very hot."

"Thank you. No," he replied. "I have a touch of rheumatism which attacks me during the effort of putting it on or taking it off."

A few minutes later Warlock returned, to announce that Fifi was nowhere to be found. This was the signal for general activity. Lady Sedgewick was much shocked, and insisted that the house should be searched from floor to ceiling. In the midst of the confusion Lord Louis observed that his presence must be an embarrassment. He felt at any moment the tell-tale bulge in his pocket might arouse suspicion, and had a horrible dread that Fifi would miraculously return to life and give tongue.

But never for an instant did he betray his anxiety, in fact he even went so far as to say:

"Do you think Sir John could have anything to do with Fifi's disappearance?"

Lady Sedgewick scouted the idea.

"He would never dare," she responded, in a voice of fate. "He would know that such an action would never be forgotten and never be forgiven."

Lord Louis bowed nervously, and, murmuring an apology, retreated, sideways, through the French windows and thence to his waiting automobile.

An eminent detective once remarked that the wisest

of all criminals makes one mistake. Lord Louis was no exception to this rule. Granted leisure for consideration he would probably have driven straight home and disposed of the body in his own garden. But, as he afterwards admitted, his soul-absorbing desire was to be rid of it with the smallest possible delay. The presence of the corpse in his pocket was an ever-growing nightmare and, consequently, when the car was passing through a thickety little copse, about half a mile from the lodge gates, he told the chauffeur to stop, and climbing out slipped away into the bushes. It was some time before he found a spot suited to his purpose. Most of the ground was so encumbered with roots that to dig without proper tools was an impossibility. Eventually he came upon a little clearing, some twelve feet square, where, to his delight, he remarked a sandy patch. Laying the body of Fifi in some long grass, he went on his knees and with bare fingers set about to excavate a grave. He was astonished to find the task more difficult than he imagined. The sand was hard, and for a long time resisted his efforts. Accordingly he took from his vest pocket a fountain pen, and by its aid succeeded in delving a small hole. He had almost finished when a voice behind him broke in upon his labours.

"Hands up, please," said the voice. "I'll teach you to set snares on my land."

Lord Louis revolved on his own axis to find that he was looking down the barrels of Sir John's twelve bore gun. In spite of the awkwardness of his predicament he preserved his self-control.

"May I remind you, Sir John," said he, "it is considerably rude to point."

"Lord Louis Lewis!" exclaimed Sir John, lowering his weapon. "Well, I'm damned! What the deuce are you up to?"

Lord Louis deliberated a moment, then said, "Sir John, you have surprised me at a moment when I hoped to be alone. But being here it would be useless to conceal from you the purpose of my activities. This small hole, which you perceive, is a grave — and here," he stretched out his hand and dragged the body of Fifi into a better light, "are the remains it was destined to inter."

"Great Scott, Fifi!" gasped Sir John.

"The same," said Lord Louis, "and if you will grant me a few moments I will explain how this melancholy occurrence came about."

"Go ahead," said Sir John, and, leaning his gun against a tree, seated himself beside Lord Louis on the grass.

When the narrative was finished Sir John threw back his head and laughed. He laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks. So infectious did his merriment prove that Lord Louis, forgetting his previous anxieties, mingled his laughter with the older man's and rocked to and fro in an agony of mirth. When Sir John had partially recovered he desired to know whether Lord Louis expected to be believed in stating that the death of Fifi was fortuitous, and, receiving "yes" for an answer, advised the nobleman "to tell that story to the marines,"

As it evidently gratified Sir John to believe what had happened was the result of a carefully laid plot, Lord Louis protested no further, but expressed the hope that the disappearance would not be laid to Sir John's account.

"No, no," said Sir John. "My wife'll always take my word for a thing. After all I can say quite honestly I had nothing to do with it."

"And I assume," said Lord Louis, tentatively, "that you will not mention this chance discovery?"

Sir John winked. "So far as I'm concerned," he said, "I have no idea at all of what became of the dog."

"Bravo!" cried Lord Louis. "And may I further assume, the bone of contention having departed, that you no longer withhold your consent to my nephew's suit?"

Sir John scratched his head. "The young blackguard did fire down the line," he said.

"The best of us are liable to mistakes," pleaded Lord Louis. "Even you, Sir John, pointed a gun at me not so very long ago."

"So I did," allowed the baronet. Then added in a cheery voice, "The man whose uncle can tell such perfect lies deserves a pretty wife," and he shot out a hand in token of consent.

A few minutes later they emerged upon the drive. Fifi's remains had been given to the earth and a handful of dried leaves scattered over her resting place.

"You'll take a cup of tea at the house?" Sir John invited.

"Thank you, no," replied Lord Louis, glancing at his watch. "I have another appointment which I must keep."

"What — another?" exclaimed Sir John, with a twinkle.

"Of a more pacific kind," added Lord Louis.

"I see," said Sir John. "Well, I'll slip along and tell the news to the wife. It'll cheer her up to know I have consented." With a wave of the hand he was gone.

The autumn dusk was falling when Lord Louis, guided by a twinkle of flame through the bushes, made his way to little Miss Sarah's side. A wood fire was burning, on which a tiny camp kettle sang merrily, and on the adjacent grass a nice jammy tea was arrayed.

"Well?" exclaimed Sarah, excitedly.

"It is all right," said Lord Louis, with a reassuring nod. "I have seen your father — everything is settled."

Miss Sarah clapped her hands. "And Fifi?" she asked.

"Oddly enough, Fifi is nowhere to be found," murmured Lord Louis, with averted head.

"What do you mean?" she interrogated.

"That is all I can tell you," he answered, "except to repeat an Eastern proverb which says that happiness should ask no questions."

"You're a dear," said Miss Sarah, and gave his hand the gentlest little pressure in the world.

After which in the gathering gloom they had tea, and Lord Louis consumed more slices of bread and jam than he could ever remember to have done before. Then side by side they sat and talked of many delightful things.

"What a lovely family yours must be," said Sarah. "Just imagine any family with two such ducks in it as you and Cedric."

The evening was growing chilly, so Lord Louis took off his motor coat and put it around them both. When eventually he rose to go there was quite a sad inflection in Sarah's voice.

"I shall never forget what you have done for me," she said, "never as long as I live." And Lord Louis, realizing that soon he was to become her uncle, boldly availed himself of a privilege of relationship in advance.

Cedric was waiting at the gates of Bruton House when Lord Louis' car drove up.

"What news?" he cried.

"I managed somehow," replied Lord Louis, rather curtly, "but you certainly don't deserve her."

And the Hon. Cedric paused for a moment in the paces of his joy to wonder why his uncle, who had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, appeared so bad tempered about it all.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE AT BATH

THERE was a letter lying on Lord Louis' breakfast table, written in a thin straggling hand, which wavered up and down as though the writer had been sore put to it to hold the pen. The writing was unfamiliar, and Lord Louis, as he broke the seal, wondered mildly who was his correspondent.

Dear Louis (so ran the letter),—

I do not expect you will remember me, as we have only met once, and you at the time were five years old. Possibly you heard your mother mention her Cousin Mary, although it is equally possible she did nothing of the kind; for I made no attempt to keep in with the family, whom I found both tiresome and snobbish and, on the rare occasions they called on me, significantly disposed to be sycophantic.

I should not be writing now were it not that I am about to die, and when dead will be unable to conduct my own affairs.

It appears, from what I have heard, you are a moderately honest man, and sufficiently well off to be proof against covetousness. Accordingly I intend to make you my executor.

Unless you decide to ignore this letter, you will

visit me and hear my wishes some day before Tuesday next. If you delay until after that date you may stop away altogether, as I shall certainly expire during the small hours of Wednesday morning.

Yours truly,
MARY ELIZABETH BRYANY.

Lord Louis read the letter twice. It bore an address in Bath. Vaguely he recalled a day in early infancy when his grandmother, with whom he was spending Easter, dressed him up in a suit of brown velveteen and a toby collar and carried him off to visit a distant relative. He remembered how they drove there in a high Stanhope and spent, for him, a torturing hour, unrelieved by cake or candy, in company with Cousin Mary. At the time she had struck him as a person of advanced years, who sat bolt upright in a high-back chair, and who spoke in a voice of that hard quality which children fear and abhor.

If she were old then, he reflected, she must now be indeed a veteran. This surmise was supported by the angular and trembling quality of the hand-writing before him, and the early Victorian use of long s's.

Cousin Mary had ever stood aloof from the members of her family, obsessed by the belief that one and all they coveted her very meagre worldly possessions. She never lost an opportunity of impressing on them her intention that no one should profit by her demise. The constant recurrence of this sub-

ject of conversation had by degrees driven away the last of her relatives, vowing that never again would they be cajoled into calling on her.

And now the final page of her life was about to be turned and the book closed for ever.

Lord Louis rose to his feet and rang the bell.

"I am going to Bath, Badger," he said to the butler who answered his ring. "Arrange for the Limousine to be at the door in twenty minutes."

It was noon when the big car drew up before a tall and depressing looking house in one of those old-world crescents so prolific in Bath.

Lord Louis mounted the steps and knocked gently, and a moment later the door was opened by a little middle-aged woman, dressed in a gown of rusty glace silk, and whose hair was drawn in a tight knot at the back.

"Are you Lord Louis Lewis?" she inquired, with the nervous inflection of one unaccustomed to the use of titles. He bowed, and she added "My name is Lavinia Brooker. Miss Bryany's companion. Will you step inside — it's this way. She always stops in the back room because the sun doesn't get there. She doesn't like the sun, you know."

Lord Louis followed the frail figure down a dark and dingy hall, to which clung the faint odours of the Regency period; that indefinable smell of varnished wallpaper, horsehair, potted plants, indifferent ventilation, and no bathroom.

Lavinia opened a door and admitted him to a dimly lit room with half-drawn blinds.

From a corner in the shadows came a voice.

"Hey! Come, have you? Go away, Brooker; don't want you." The voice sounded like dry twigs breaking. Lavinia Brooker left the room, closing the door softly.

Confronting Lord Louis, in the same high-back chair which had impressed itself on his infant memory, sat a very old lady. Her face, deeply seemed and furrowed, was set in an expression of permanent disapproval. Her thin, blue-veined hands rested twitchingly on her lap. On her head was a lace cap and a shawl of the same was about her shoulders, falling in folds over the heavy black brocade of her dress. She was quite immobile, save only for her eyes, which darted hither and thither like the tongue of a snake.

Suspended to the wall, behind where she sat, was an ivory figure of Christ upon a cross of ebony.

When the darting eyes had looked him up and down many times she spoke.

"You didn't lose much time in coming."

"I came at once," he replied, "judging by your letter you had need of me."

"Yes. I shall die the day after tomorrow. Sit down — sit down! You get on my nerves standing there." He took a chair in silence. "I have no money to leave," she crackled, observing how readily he obeyed her order, "so you needn't be polite in any false hope of gain."

Lord Louis was justly nettled. "It is natural to some of us to be polite, Cousin Mary," he said, "as it is natural to others to be the reverse."

Miss Bryany chuckled. "Good — good!" she said. "Now listen to me. I have an annuity of two hundred a year, which will end with me on Tuesday night." Lord Louis interrupted to ask what made her so sure of dying at that exact time.

"I ought to know," she returned. "I leave this room every evening at nine o'clock and the effort of getting to bed nearly kills me. My strength is running out and I know just how long it will last me. Don't ask any more questions. Beyond the annuity I have nothing except this house and what it contains. After my funeral everything is to be sold. A twelve pounds ten funeral. Whatever money remains is to be spent in putting up a monument over my grave. If the sale is properly managed there ought to be three thousand pounds."

"Cousin Mary," said Lord Louis, "twelve pounds ten is a small price for a funeral, whereas three thousand pounds is a great deal to spend on monumental masonry. The division appears unequal."

"Intentionally," replied Miss Bryany. "My relatives won't be able to see an expensive coffin, but the monument will exist as a lasting source of irritation to them."

Lord Louis resisted the temptation to criticize adversely this uncharitable resolve, and merely asked if there was any particular spirit of design she desired to have followed.

Miss Bryany shook her head. "You can put a public-house over my grave, so long as the money is spent," she retorted, then, seeing his expression of

disapproval, added, "You are thinking it is a pity I don't leave it to you, eh?"

"My dear cousin," he replied, "I fear you have been denied a clear vision of my mental processes. Rest assured I in no way covet your property, having more than sufficient means of my own. On the other hand, I consider your intentions do you small credit. There are worthier objects to which the money might be devoted than the erection of a piece of masonry which you will never see and others will probably find distasteful."

Miss Bryany tucked up the corners of her nose and emitted some sounds which might have been intended for laughter.

"I like you, Louis," she said. "You are the first person who ever dared to stand up to me. The rest when they came, which was seldom enough, thank the Lord, were too civil for my taste. Because they hoped my bits and sticks might go their way they lacked the pluck to speak up and say what they really thought of me. The fools! They might have profited if they had. Hate cowards and sycophants! You are not a coward, Louis, and I've a mind to make you my sole legatee."

"I trust you will do no such thing," he answered. "I have no possible claim to your bounty, whereas others have."

"What others?"

"Your companion — Miss Brooker, for instance."

"Tch! Not a penny. She's the worst of the lot. One of the patient kind. Hasn't the spirit of a

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mouse. Been with me these forty years and never flared out once. Put up with anything. Besides she's a Roman — can't endure Romans. I'll show you the sort she is." So saying, Miss Bryany took a small hand-bell and rang it imperatively.

The door opened and Lavinia Brooker entered noiselessly.

"Yes, Miss Bryany?" she said.

"Brooker!" came from the old lady, "you are a fool, aren't you?"

Lavinia flushed ever so slightly. "You have often said so," she replied.

"Then you say it, for a change. Say to Lord Louis here, say —'Lord Louis, I'm a poor mean-spirited fool.'"

The flush spread over Lavinia's features; nevertheless she opened her lips and would have obeyed had not Lord Louis interposed.

"Cousin Mary," he said, "your sense of humour and mine do not run on parallel lines. You put me in mind of a small boy crushing flies against the window-pane for sport."

Lavinia gasped. In all the forty years of their association she had never heard Miss Bryany addressed with such absolute candour. But to her amazement Miss Bryany only chuckled.

"A poor simile, Louis," she said, "for the small boy is protected by his strength."

"Whereas you are protected by your weakness," he replied, incisively.

Miss Bryany frowned a little. "You can go,

Brooker," she said. "But wait outside. I shall want you to show Lord Louis round presently."

The "Yes, Miss Bryany," from Lavinia was scarcely audible as she retreated from the room.

"And to think," said Lord Louis, when the door had closed, "the poor little thing has endured such treatment for forty years. Truly some women are angels. Cousin Mary, if you were to leave ten times the value of your estate to Lavinia Brooker you would not have discharged a farthing in the pound of your debt to her."

But Miss Bryany only chuckled.

"There's an inventory on that table," she said. "You are an expert on valuations, aren't you?"

"I can form a fair judgment on works of artistic merit," he replied.

"Then go round with Brooker and come and tell me what you value the property at."

Lavinia Brooker was awaiting him in the hall. The poor little body was sitting bolt upright on a hard oak chair. The mid-day sun percolated through the blue and red panes of the window above the front door, focussing two patches of brilliant colour on the thin, wan face. The effect was pathetic — the forlorn little figure in this riot of contrasting pigments.

Lord Louis was touched by the sight and secretly condemned his cousin, who had brought a life so utterly into slavery — sapped its best years and then, at the finish, proposed to cast it aside like a worn-out glove.

"Will you come this way, Lord Louis?" she said, and guided him from room to room. He made a careful examination of all the house contained, jotting down his valuations against the items of the inventory. He was astonished to find his cousin Mary had considerably under-estimated the worth of her possessions, which he assessed at nearer six, than three, thousand pounds.

There were excellent specimens of Chippendale and Hepplewhite furniture, and a Sheraton suite in the dining-room of the first quality. The china, too, was far above the average.

The greater portion of the examination was conducted in silence, but more than once he had occasion to comment on the very exact knowledge shown by Lavinia Brooker of the numbers and classification of the objects he was inspecting.

Lavinia gave a wan smile. "I ought to know," she said. "We have a different day for each room; and once a week I bring down all the plate and china and count it over before Miss Bryany." Lord Louis' eyebrows inquired why. "She isn't strong enough to look them over herself and climb stairs," she explained, "and she says it keeps a hold on me. She thinks I might take something otherwise."

"Miss Brooker," said Lord Louis, "why do you put up with it?"

"She pays me fifteen pounds a year," came the answer.

Lord Louis stroked his nose reflectively. "What are your intentions when Miss Bryany has gone?"

Lavinia shook her head. "I just don't know, Lord Louis," she answered. "I am too old to get another place, I expect."

"Will you have any private means of support?"

Again she replied, "I don't know." But her eyes asked him a question.

"I am afraid," said he, in answer to that silent appeal, "it is not Miss Bryany's intention to include any personal bequests in her will."

If there ever had existed a ray of hope in the poor soul's mind that her years of faithful service had not been spent in vain it died at his words. She made no outward sign, however, but only nodded gravely.

"You have my deepest sympathy," said Lord Louis.

As they were returning to the room where Miss Bryany awaited them Lavinia suddenly took the courage to demand:

"What is she going to do with her money?"

"The present intention," he replied, "is to raise a sum on the sale of her effects and devote it to the erection of a monument over her grave."

"That is like her," nodded Lavinia. "So everything is to be sold — I see." She paused. "Lord Louis, did you notice a crucifix on the wall in there?"

"Yes. An ivory crucifix."

"I want to buy it for myself. I'm a Catholic, you know. It's a beautiful crucifix — for forty years I've said my prayers before it. Do you think it would fetch a great deal at the sale? I could spend

six pounds five shillings — if necessary." The speech escaped in short, disjointed sentences, punctuated by nervous gasps. It was evident the future of the crucifix was of mighty concern to Lavinia Brooker. Lord Louis guessed, and guessed rightly, the six pounds and odd shillings she was willing to pay represented all her worldly goods. The savings of forty years at fifteen pounds a year. His heart warmed towards her.

"I will examine it carefully," he said.

Miss Bryany received the news that her property would probably realize double what she had imagined without enthusiasm.

"Ought to be good for another twenty-five feet on the monument," she said.

Lord Louis turned his attention to the crucifix. On close inspection, he observed it was of the finest workmanship imaginable. The figure of Christ was exquisitely carved in ivory — the modelling of the torso being some of the best he had ever seen. On the head was a crown of thorns, fashioned in Chinese jade, the cloth about the loins was stained a deep and ruddy brown, as also was the hair. Silver nails pierced the hands and feet, and where they punctured the skin tiny cabouchon rubies were inset, glistening like drops of blood on dead-white flesh.

Instinctively he realized that here was a work of art far above the ordinary — a work which would command a high price in any sale-room.

His thoughts reverted to Lavinia Brooker, willing to sacrifice her fortune of six pounds five shillings to

gain possession of the crucifix, and now anxiously awaiting his verdict.

Miss Bryany's voice cut in on his reflections.

"What do you think of it, Louis?" she demanded.

"I think," he replied, "it would be an act of grace to present this crucifix to your little companion."

"Hum!" snapped Miss Bryany, "then I shall do nothing of the kind. It 'ud be encouraging Romanism — and I hate Romans. She's been getting at you, Louis."

"On the contrary," he returned, with some warmth, "I consider Miss Brooker to be the most disinterested woman I have had the good fortune to meet."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Miss Bryany.

Lord Louis drew on his gloves. "I shall bid you good-bye," said he. "I have some arrangements to make at home. But I will return tomorrow and take up my quarters at the Mitre Hotel, in case there is anything you wish to discuss with me."

"Come and see me again," said Miss Bryany, as he laid his hand on the door knob. "It makes a change," and there was a tinge of humanity in her voice.

Lord Louis turned.

"Cousin Mary," he said, "change is good for all of us. May I hope, before it is too late, you will accept that view."

Lavinia Brooker spoke to him at the front door.

"Shall I be able to buy it for six pounds five shillings?" she asked.

"I am afraid," said he, "the crucifix is worth far more than that. It will probably fetch some hundreds at the sale."

Lavinia made no reply, but two large tears welled over her lower lids and found little water-courses and runnels in the furrows of her cheeks.

Lord Louis shook hands, feelingly, and bade her farewell; while, from the inner room, came the insistent note of Miss Bryany's bell. Lavinia closed the door and, drying her eyes, hurried back to answer the summons.

"You've been crying," said her mistress, with a piercing glance. "You've been crying, Brooker. What for?"

"I don't know, Miss Bryany. It's very silly of me."

Miss Bryany endorsed this sentiment with a nod.

"What do you think of Louis?" she demanded.

"He was very nice to me," answered Lavinia, guardedly; then added, "I don't expect he meant to be rude to you, Miss Bryany. I'm very sorry if I was the cause."

"Little fool!" crackled Miss Bryany. "Didn't you see that I liked it? Will you never learn anything before it's too late?"

The meaning of which remark was entirely lost on Lavinia, who stepped forward to arrange a cushion behind her charge's head and received a sharp blow over the knuckles with a fan handle for her pains.

Lord Louis returned to Bristol and made arrangements to be away for a few days. On the following

afternoon he drove back to Bath and ensconced himself at the Mitre Hotel. Before dining he paid a short visit to Miss Bryany, whom he found very uncommunicative. He detected a growing weakness in her bearing. Her back was a shade less rigid and her hands moved more feebly than before.

"Yes, I'm much weaker," she said, reading his thoughts. "Getting to bed last night nearly did for me. Tonight'll be worse and tomorrow night——" she paused and compressed her lips so that they resembled a fine wire drawn over the lower half of her face, "tomorrow night'll be — Tuesday."

As he walked back to his hotel Lord Louis confessed to himself that she was probably right and Wednesday morning would dawn on one soul the less.

At nine o'clock the same evening the following scene was enacted. Miss Bryany looked at the clock, then fired off the two words "Bed, Brooker!"

Lavinia laid aside her crochet, and there ensued the frightfully complicated proceeding of putting Miss Bryany to bed. A business attended by heavy breathing, the cracking of joints, the undoing of dozens of hooks and eyes (for to Miss Bryany the fashions of the early Victorian era had never changed), strainings, tuggings, little intervals of rest and constant sips from a glass, the contents of which smelt powerfully of peppermint. At last it was over. The sheet was tucked under the old lady's chin, the nightlight lighted and the gas lowered.

It was Lavinia's custom to wait in the room for

ten minutes after her mistress had retired, in case there might be any final instructions.

The time stole by on feet of lead, and ever in Lavinia's brain grew a longing to ask something. But try as she would the words declined to find expression. Then, from the bed, came the sound of Miss Bryany's voice, and very jerky it was.

"Needn't look so glum, Brooker. Only have to do it once more."

"Oh, Miss Bryany!" said Lavinia, "you know I wasn't thinking that."

"What were you thinking, then?" Lavinia hesitated. "Come on!"

"Miss Bryany — I — you — Lord Louis told me what you intended doing with your things — and I've been wondering — I was going to ask whether —" she moistened her lips. "That crucifix — I would like to have bought it. Would you let me. I do so want it. If you would let me buy it now — before the sale, I mean. Upstairs in my box I have got six pounds and a few shillings — I'd give it to you at once — it isn't very much, I know — and I'm sure the crucifix is worth more — but I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind that seeing it was me."

She halted, breathlessly awaiting the answer and it came, thus —

"Seeing that it's you, eh, Brooker? That's good! Never did trust you, did I? I'm not going to begin now. Suppose you thought this a fine chance to get something on the cheap. A low down thought, Brooker, low down."

"I am sorry," said Lavinia. "I offered you all I had. Good-night, Miss Bryany."

"Shut the door. I've not done with you yet. Don't like your looks — you're up to some mischief."

"No, really."

"Yes, you are. Look here! Did you do as I told you and take a room near by to go to directly I have gone?"

"I took a little room in Chadwick Street."

"Then you can go there tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. I don't fancy your prowling about among my things while I'm in no state to keep an eye on you."

"But, Miss Bryany ——"

"You can come back in the morning. There are a couple of shillings in my purse, yonder, to pay for your bed and breakfast."

"You don't really mean me to go, Miss Bryany?"

"Get a nightshirt and be off."

"I can't leave you alone in the house. Oh, Miss Bryany, you know I'd never touch anything."

"Not going to give you the chance. Get a nightshirt and call in here for the florin before you go."

So strong is the habit of obedience that almost without realizing what she was doing Lavinia found herself in her bedroom making a parcel of her nightdress, sponge-bag, brush and comb. From a vase on the mantelpiece she took a short length of string, and sitting on the bed began to unravel the knots.

While so occupied the full injustice of Miss Bryany's command began to assert itself.

For forty years she had bowed down before every whim of the exacting old lady, whose smallest wish had become, to her, an absolute law. Her life had been subjected to a *régime* of studied cruelty and humiliation, all of which she had borne with unshakable patience. And now, to crown everything, she was to be thrust out of doors in the middle of the night because it pleased her employer to doubt her honesty.

The last knot was unravelled, and Lavinia took the parcel on her knee and tied it up.

Suddenly her eyes filled with tears — hot tears of resentment, and to herself she said —" It isn't fair!"

Then she rose, put on her hat and cape, and placing the parcel beneath her arm descended the stairs. In the hall she halted — threw a glance towards Miss Bryany's door — and stole away to the back room and went down on her knees before the crucifix.

"Is it fair?" she asked. And it seemed to her a voice answered the question and bade her be of good courage.

Five minutes later she was in Miss Bryany's room, taking the florin from the purse on the dressing-table.

"What were you doing in the parlour?" demanded Miss Bryany.

"Saying my prayers," answered Lavinia.

A silence, then —"What have you got in that parcel?"

"My nightdress."

"What else?"

"A sponge-bag and my brush and comb."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Miss Bryany."

"Looks a big parcel. Sure there isn't anything else, Brooker?"

"I have told you there isn't," said Lavinia.

"You haven't packed any of my lace, I suppose?"

Lavinia coloured, but made no reply.

"Open that parcel, Brooker."

The corners of Lavinia's mouth began to work.

"D' y' hear?"

"I hear."

"Open it, then."

Lavinia gulped, and said in a very steady voice:

"I shan't open it."

"What's that?"

"I shan't open it — I won't open it."

"What d' ye say?"

Then of a sudden the flood gates of the little companion's wrath gave way, and forty years of accumulated grievance and repression surged through her thin and quivering lips. Lavinia Brooker, slave and servitor, stood up and spoke her mind as a free woman and a brave.

It was a long and bitter denunciation, and finished with the words, "May your Master be kinder to you than you deserve." So saying she ran from the room and the front-door banged behind her.

During the whole recital Miss Bryany had scarcely

uttered a word. Once or twice, when, for sheer lack of breath, her accuser had stopped for a moment she had interpolated "Go it!"; and had Lavinia been less obsessed with her own rhetoric she might have observed the same dancing light in the old lady's eyes which had appeared when Lord Louis attacked her sense of humour the day before.

After the front-door closed she gripped the top sheet and painfully pulled herself to a sitting posture. Arrived at which she laughed — actually laughed — and this time there was no mistaking the sound. Then, inch by inch, she lowered her feet to the ground and reached out for the ebony stick which stood by the bedside. After several unsuccessful efforts she managed to rise, and five minutes later had subsided in a chair before a writing-table on the other side of the room.

Taking a pen and paper she wrote — very waveringly at first, but with gathering strength as she proceeded. When finished she read over what she had written.

"And now," she said, "for a witness."

The lower half of the window was open, and thither she made her way, taking the hand-bell from the bedside table en route.

. . . . . .

Lord Louis Lewis, having finished dinner at the Mitre, was conscious of a distinct sensation of dyspepsia, which the old brown brandy of the hostelry and a cigar from his own case failed to dispel. Previous experience had taught him that the surest

method of combating this ailment was a short, but brisk, walk. Consequently, at a quarter after ten, he took his hat from the hall stand and strode forth into the night.

One direction being as good as another, he allowed his footsteps to lead him towards his Cousin Mary's abode. As he turned the corner of the street there came to his ears the sound of a bell, repeated at short intervals. Being possessed of a highly retentive memory, he at once recognized the note as being the same he had heard when Miss Bryany summoned her companion. He accordingly hurried in the direction of the sound and, a moment later, beheld the unusual spectacle of the good lady herself framed in the opening of the street level window. Seemingly she supported herself with great difficulty, and only accomplished the ringing of the bell by a supreme effort.

"Good Heavens!" said he, "what on earth are you doing?"

"Louis!" she croaked. "Lucky — come inside — want you — climb over the sill — kill me to get round to the front-door."

"But where is Miss Brooker?"

"Gone. Be quick!"

Entry by way of the window did not strongly recommend itself to Lord Louis, however the necessity seemed urgent. With a glance up and down the street, to be sure that he was not observed, he mounted the palings and thence scrambled into the room.

Miss Bryany had staggered back to the bed, on which she lay in a state of exhaustion. Lord Louis cast about for a restorative, and finding the bottle of peppermint administered a dose of considerable strength, which, accompanied by some sniffs of the smelling salts, appeared to have a good effect. Then lighting the gas he sat by her side until she should have recovered sufficiently to explain what was amiss.

After a while the old lady began a series of convulsions and vibrations which alarmed him not a little. Perceiving this she found strength to say — "All right, Louis, I'm only laughing." Greatly relieved, he demanded the cause of her mirth, and was astonished at the apparent irrelevance of the reply.

"Because," said she, "Lavinia Brooker has come to life — she's a woman." And bit by bit the story of Lavinia's outburst was made known to him.

"She called me everything — she, of all people. Oh, Louis, it was worth baiting her for." A pause, then —"The paper — on the writing-table — read it, Louis."

Lord Louis crossed the room and took up a sheet of paper scrawled over in his cousin's hand.

It was the last will and testament of Mary Elizabeth Bryany, wherein she bequeathed all the monies that should result from the sale of her property, real and personal, to Lavinia Brooker. There was one proviso, namely, that the said Lavinia should be kept in ignorance of the fact until after the sale.

Lord Louis read it twice. He then turned to the bed.

"Cousin Mary," he said, with deep feeling, "I congratulate you."

"Stuff!" returned the old lady. "Witness the signature and put it in your pocket. And, Louis, you must tell her I laughed."

"This will require two signatures," he said. Lord Louis obtained the second signature from a corpulent old gentleman who was returning home from a Masonic banquet and who was so completely staggered by the request that he forgot to remove his silk hat, and wiped his surprise from his forehead with the red silk comforter about his neck.

When he had gone, for nearly an hour no other word was spoken, then she said —

"Little fool! Why didn't she speak up years ago? Never could abide being humoured — never. Like straight talk, I do." A pause, then —"And I got it. I'm all right, Louis — come and see me tomorrow — I shan't go till tomorrow."

But Lord Louis noticed a stealing greyness coming over the withered features. "Will you entrust me with a latch-key, then?" he asked. "Miss Brooker may not come back and — and I shall not take advantage of it, Cousin Mary."

"In my purse yonder," she replied, casting her eyes towards the dressing-table. Lord Louis opened the purse and, with that curious photographic sense to which we are all susceptible at certain times, the contents impressed themselves on his memory. Besides the latch-key were four farthings, a three-penny bit, a piece of paper bearing an address, a broken

crochet hook, some pearl buttons, and a stamp torn from an envelope with the intention of using it again.

Putting the key in his pocket he bade his cousin a gentle "good-night," and let himself quietly from the room.

A little way up the street, in a dark doorway, he came upon a policeman who was setting at defiance the edict against smoking on duty. Apologizing for the interruption and proffering a cigar from his own case to compensate for the one which had been thrown in the area at his approach, Lord Louis begged to be directed to the most adjacent doctor.

Five minutes later he was ringing the night-bell of a house a few streets away. Dr. Oliver had been kept at a late case and had not yet retired. Consequently but little time was lost before they arrived together on Miss Bryany's doorstep.

"She had made up her mind to last until tomorrow night," said Lord Louis, as he fitted the key into the latch, "but personally I have grave doubts about it. This way."

In Miss Bryany's room all was silent. The night-light burned steadily in its little saucer of water, but the lamp of Miss Bryany's spirit had fluttered out a few moments after Lord Louis had bade her farewell. She had thrown the last of her reserves into the field on Monday and there was nothing left for Tuesday's battle.

"I am afraid," said Lord Louis, "I have called you in vain."

Dr. Oliver made his examination and withdrew.

"You are remaining, I suppose?" he inquired.

Lord Louis nodded. "For tonight," said he, shaking hands with the doctor.

At eight o'clock the following morning he heard the sound of a key turning in the front-door. Stepping into the passage he laid a finger to his lips.

Lavinia Brooker started in surprise. "Is anything the matter?" she asked, and he nodded gravely. "I was afraid it would happen. Lord Louis, it is my fault, you know."

"Miss Brooker," he responded gently, "she could only have lasted a few hours longer at most."

"You know what took place, then?"

"She told me before she died." Lavinia turned away, and misinterpreting her movement, he added — "Do not blame yourself, Miss Brooker, you were given every provocation."

"Lord Louis," she answered, and her voice was extraordinarily steady, "I don't. That is what I can't understand. That is the worst part — I'm not sorry — I'm glad, even,— and if she were alive now I wouldn't ask her forgiveness."

"Come, come!" said Lord Louis. "You do yourself less than justice in bearing resentment."

"Was *she* sorry, then?" asked Lavinia, with a touch of spirit, "did she regret anything?"

"There are nobler standards than hers for us to emulate," he responded, somewhat sententiously.

"Ah, she was not sorry. I knew she wouldn't be. What did she say about me?" Lord Louis hesitated. "Please, I wish to know."

"She said very little," he replied, eventually. "To tell you the truth, Miss Brooker, she laughed."

"Laughed?" echoed Lavinia, then: "I see — she laughed."

"I would not have told you," he said, "but she insisted."

"Every one obeyed Miss Bryany," said Lavinia, with a cross between a sob and a laugh. "I would like to see her before I go."

"Before you go?"

"Yes. I was not to be allowed in the house after she had died."

Together they entered the silent bedroom. Miss Bryany lay with a fixed, sardonic smile on her features, as one who had passed with a joke between her lips. Lavinia shrunk back as though she had been struck, for the expression epitomised to her forty years of unkindliness. To fathom its true reason would have taken a finer perception than hers, and it was no part of Lord Louis' executorship to offer enlightenment.

"You will leave me your address?" he asked, when a little later he was standing beside Lavinia, who had packed a pilgrim basket with her few belongings.

"I have a room at 14, Chadwick Street," she replied, "but I don't know how long I shall be able to stay there. Good-bye, Lord Louis."

He watched her until she was out of sight — a poor, little derelict setting forth to brave great waters without a rudder and without a sail.

He determined to lose no time in having the will

proved and the property realized, conceiving that delay in this matter would mean something akin to starvation for Lavinia Brooker. He placed the business in the hands of his own solicitors, who put it through with unexampled expedition. In less than three weeks the legal affairs had been settled and notices of the sale appeared in the local newspapers and on the walls of Miss Bryany's house.

In the meanwhile Lavinia Brooker passed through days which were a positive nightmare of monotony — a nightmare unrelieved by the exhilaration of its sensations. Besides the six pounds five shillings which represented her savings, she possessed about thirty shillings in cash from her last quarter's salary. The owner of the house in Chadwick Street was a kindly soul and agreed to give her board and lodging for twelve and six a week.

She put down her name on the books of an employment agency, the superintendent of which held out but small hopes of finding her a place, and gave herself over to brooding. Accustomed as she was to toil for fourteen hours of the twenty-four, enforced inaction was a condition she was constitutionally incapable of coping with. Therefore, she brooded — and her brooding led her soul into dark places. Try as she did to reproach herself for her outburst against Miss Bryany she was unable to do so. The memory of the smile on those dead features rankled increasingly. It maddened her to reflect that her outpourings had not done more than provide food for laughter. She found herself thinking out verbal assaults

she might have discharged against the old lady. But the curious fact was not so much Lavinia's resentment as her whole-hearted desire to be sorry for her resentment. She longed to be able to forgive Miss Bryany, and to ask forgiveness — to regain the tolerance and forbearance which for forty years had never been shaken.

On the fourth day she watched the funeral *cortège* pass the end of Chadwick Street. There was but one wreath, a gift, as she rightly guessed, from Lord Louis Lewis. He himself was riding alone in the one carriage which followed the hearse.

When they had passed out of sight Lavinia, acting on impulse, followed in the direction of the cemetery.

"Lovely roses, lady," said a flower-seller.

Lavinia walked on a few steps, halted, and came back.

"How much are they?" she asked.

The flower-seller, being a fair judge of the length of a customer's purse, demanded a reasonable price, and a dozen roses changed hands for a shilling.

Lavinia continued on her way, clutching the flowers and trying to force her mind to appreciate the purpose for which she had bought them.

She arrived at the cemetery as the funeral was coming away on its return journey. She stood back in the shadow of the gates, so as not to be observed, and not until they had gone by did she emerge and make her way towards a spot she knew Miss Bryany had chosen for her last resting place,

Already the diggers had begun to replace the earth, but they courteously withdrew at the approach of the belated mourner. She did not stay long, after a glance into the grave.

"I have brought you a few roses, Miss Bryany," she said, "but I don't believe I mean it — and I suppose you would only laugh if I did." Then she hurried away, ashamed to the core for having so spoken.

When she had returned to Chadwick Street and was sitting on the little bed, with the broken spring mattress, she reviewed her conduct dispassionately.

"I believe," she said, "if I could pray again before the ivory crucifix I might be changed. Oh, God! I don't want to feel like this any longer."

The loss of the crucifix, her sole confidant and companion of four decades, was a deprivation the extent of which she hardly dared confess even to herself.

"If I were there with it," she said, "I know everything would be all right again — and I should win back what I have lost."

Lavinia snuffled and rummaged in her bag for a handkerchief. Inside lay the key of Miss Bryany's house, which she had forgotten to return. She took it out and held it in her hand, while the cheap clock on the mantelshelf ticked out the minutes of her resolution.

A little after midnight Lavinia silently admitted herself to the house which had been her home for so long. After closing the front-door she halted breath-

lessly, and listened. There was no sound, and taking her courage in both hands she made her way to the back room. The place was in utter darkness, but Lavinia could have threaded her way blindfold through any of the rooms, so indelibly was the arrangement of the furniture imprinted on her mind. She made sure that the blind was drawn and then passed her hand to and fro beneath the gas jet until her fingers encountered the string of the box of matches, which from time immemorial had suspended there.

She struck a match and applied it to a candle on the small table next to Miss Bryany's high-backed chair. When the flame steadied itself she began to absorb the familiar surroundings. Beside the candle-stick lay her crochet, just as she had laid it aside when Miss Bryany dictated "Bed, Brooker," for the last time. The back of Lavinia's throat felt hot as she picked it up, and she experienced a sensation of chokiness. She should have tidied away that piece of crochet in the middle drawer of the cabinet. Miss Bryany would have made a fuss if she had found it lying about in the morning. Then she turned her eyes towards the crucifix, spiritually white in its recess.

With a happy sound of recognition Lavinia went down on her knees.

When she had finished, the dark places in her soul had vanished.

"I knew it would be all right if I came," she said.

On her way down the hall she turned into Miss

Bryany's room. It was faintly illumined by the glow from a street lamp on the other side of the road. Very strange it seemed there should be no sound of breathing from the bed.

Lavinia crossed and laid a hand on the pillow.

"I am very, very sorry, Miss Bryany," she said.

Something glistening on the dressing-table caught her eye — it was a silver corner of Miss Bryany's purse.

Lavinia fumbled in her bag for the latch-key which had admitted her. "I'll put it in the purse," she said to herself — then hesitated. A thought ran through her brain that she might want to return just once more to bid farewell to the crucifix. She knew it was wrong, but, after all, it was a very little crime and there were a few things she would like to say to her old confessor before their partnership was dissolved for all time. And so Lavinia slipped out into the night, the house door-key still in her bag.

She had broken the law — had made burglarious entry — and stolen twenty minutes of prayer to put her soul in order.

A catalogue was made of the effects of the late Miss Bryany, and a neat red label tied to each piece of furniture and ornament; otherwise the house was left just as in normal times, the auctioneer conceiving that his wares presented a better appearance in their usual positions.

On the day preceding the sale the front-door was opened and intending purchasers and curious neighbours flooded the premises. The latter were by far

the more assiduous in their attentions, for, being unembarrassed by the necessity for making choices, their leisure was wholly occupied in a critical survey of the effects of the late Miss Bryany, and impressions of her mode of life to be gathered therefrom. They commented freely on the limitations of her wardrobe and kitchen appointments. They observed the state of the wall-papers and paint, and declared that for decay their most unfavourable surmises had been surpassed. Objects of beauty were passed over with unseeing eyes as being of minor importance when such unrivalled opportunities were presented for ascertaining the number of holes in their late neighbour's stockings and underwear.

There were quite a number of dealers present who, though outwardly depreciating the value of the crucifix, inwardly determined to secure it at all costs. The china, also, attracted a deal of notice, and the prospects of realizing a round sum as a result of the sale were excellent.

In the late afternoon, when the crowd had somewhat diminished, came Lavinia Brooker. By the exercise of the greatest control she had battled down the impulse to return by night. But today the doors were open for the world to walk inside. The sight of so many people in those quiet passages and rooms, unused to the sound of feet other than her own, caused her to shrink back abashed. She stepped aside into Miss Bryany's room to allow two dealers to pass.

"Not a bad crucifix at all," one of them was saying.

"Yes, but there's precious little market for that class of goods."

Lavinia shuddered. Her soul shrank at the thought of this beautiful thing being spoken of as so much merchandise.

"I'll get it over as quick as I can," she thought, "else I shall make a fool of myself."

She threw a final glance round Miss Bryany's room and noticed the old lady's purse still lying on the dressing-table, seemingly no one having thought fit to remove it.

"And now," she said, when her footsteps had taken her to the door of the back room, "for the last time."

There were a number of people in the room, several of whom were afflicted with high-pitched voices. The babel of tongues was intolerable and jarred as hatefully as laughter in a church. She longed for silence to make her adieux to her old friend and comforter. Confidences were impossible in all this noise and she wished, cordially, she had never come at all.

Then the crowd parted and gave her a view of the ivory figure on the cross.

"Oh!" she gasped, and again "Oh!" For about the neck of the figure was a red label bearing the words, "Lot 39."

A hot flush of resentment surged to her cheeks,

and she started forward as though to snatch away the offending message. Then, in the midst of her impulse, she halted, wheeled about and hurried from the house, every fibre in her being crying out against the shame which had been done.

The sale was announced to begin at eleven-thirty on the following morning, and Lord Louis was one of the first arrivals. He was met in the hall by an excited clerk of the auctioneer's staff.

"Lot 39 has been stolen!" gasped the young man.

"My memory for detail is as good as most men's," replied Lord Louis, "but I cannot, for the moment, recall what Lot 39 may have been."

"The crucifix," said the clerk, "and it was here when I locked up the house last night."

Lord Louis preserved his calm. "Has anything else been taken?" he demanded, and received a negative answer. "Are there any signs of forcible entry having been made?"

The clerk shook his head. "What had I better do, my lord?" he inquired. "Inform the police?"

Lord Louis stroked his nose. "They would hardly be likely to recover it in time for the sale," he replied. "I think you had better leave the matter in my hands. Perhaps there is an explanation to be found, and your present duties are more than sufficient to occupy you."

Outwardly unmoved he entered Miss Bryany's bedroom, where, finding himself alone, he allowed his expression to change to one of keen disappointment.

"Now I wonder who has taken it," he said to himself, then added—"Poor Lavinia Brooker! I was going to buy you the crucifix, and now the pleasure of the deed is lost to both of us."

His hand fell on Miss Bryany's purse, still lying on the dressing-table. It was of no conceivable value to any one and had not been included in any job lots of odds and ends. It occurred to him that the purse would form a little souvenir of his executorship. Accordingly he dropped it in the outer pocket of his coat and moved away to the drawing-room, where the voice of the auctioneer was already lifted in supplication.

The sale of Miss Bryany's house and effects realized a profit of £6,344. 9s. 2½d.

Lord Louis returned to his hotel, and after dining penned a short note to tell Lavinia of her sudden accession to the sum mentioned. He then took a cab and drove up the hill to Chadwick Street.

The door of number 14 was opened by Lavinia's landlady, and Lord Louis asked her to deliver the letter at once.

"She's upstairs," responded the excellent woman. "Third landing—door on the right. Why don't you slip up and see her yourself? I can't go now, or the milk'll burn, and there never was such a one as me for forgetting things."

Accordingly Lord Louis slipped upstairs, or rather walked up with his firm, but quiet, tread. As he approached the third landing he caught sight of a

mirror which reflected an image through a half-open door. The image was of a small woman on her knees before an ivory figure on a cross of ebony.

Lord Louis stopped to make sure his eyes did not deceive him. Then he turned and descended the stairs.

In the hall he met the landlady, the immediate needs of the milk having apparently been forgotten.

"Did you see 'er?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "It occured to me that as the hour is late and my call might be inopportune, I must induce you to deliver the letter after all," and pressing a half sovereign upon her he retreated from the house.

He walked slowly back to the hotel in a serious and reflective mood.

"It's up to you, Cousin Mary," he said. "It is you who made a thief of Lavinia Brooker — for lack of trusting her. But what a pity — what a pity!"

Emptying his pockets, before retiring to bed, he came across his cousin's purse. Although he remembered perfectly what was in it he opened the catch and tipped the contents into the palm of his hand. Four farthings, a three-penny bit, some pearl buttons, the broken crochet hook, the piece of paper, the stamp and — six golden sovereigns, a five-shilling piece and a latch-key.

Lord Louis looked at the collection in amazement before the truth dawned on his brain.

Lavinia Brooker might be a thief, but she had paid for what she stole with all her worldly goods —

the savings of forty years at fifteen pounds a year.

His eyes were a trifle dim as he wrote her a letter explaining how a slight error had occurred in the amount mentioned in his previous note, and that instead of her credit being £6,344. 9s. 2½d., there was actually a matter of £6,350. 14s. 2½d. due to her, which included the private sale of the crucifix omitted in the last statement.

CHAPTER V

THE CELLINI SALT-CELLAR

(An extract from the Life of Benvenuto Cellini)

. . . . . the salt-cellar was the first to be finished. . . . . As I have said before, it was of oval form, about two-thirds of a cubit high, and was all of gold, ... it represented the Sea and the Land. Both figures were seated, with their legs interlaced, just as the arms of the sea run into the land. . . . . In the Sea's right hand I had placed a trident, and in his left a ship, very finely worked, to hold the salt. Under the figure were his four sea-horses . . . . . and all around him were different kinds of fishes and other marine creatures. The water was represented by waves exquisitely enamelled in its own colour. For the Land I had made a lovely lady with a cornucopia in her hand, naked like the male figure. In her left hand I had placed a little Ionic temple, and this was for the pepper. Under her I had fashioned the most beautiful animals which the earth produces . . . . . with all the exquisiteness you can imagine.

When I set this piece before him, the King cried aloud in astonishment, and could not look at it long enough.

"I FEAR this will prove a great shock to your daughter," said Miss Virginia Cremorne, when the usual formalities, consequent upon an acceptance of marriage, had been observed.

Mr. Albert Hoate brushed the remark aside.

"You have made me very happy, Virginia," he said. "The thought of dying a widower has always oppressed me. It is a sad thing for a man of companionable habit to spend his declining years alone."

"You speak as one already senile," murmured Virginia, "whereas, to my eyes, you are but approaching the heyday of life."

"Love blinds the vision," replied Mr. Hoate, somewhat sententiously.

Miss Virginia Cremorne gave him an arch look —

"I see the clearer for love," she cooed, and Mr. Hoate pressed her hand with profound emotion.

"Then, may I beg you," he asked, "to name the day?"

"I had rather take my commands from you," came the dutiful response.

Mr. Hoate expanded with pride. "My sixtieth birthday takes place on the first day of next year, which, oddly enough, is 1860. Let us celebrate the dual anniversary by our wedding?"

The suggestion meeting with Miss Cremorne's entire approval, Mr. Hoate rose to his feet. "And now," he said, "we will find Emily and bring her the glad tidings."

He held open the door for her to pass.

Virginia hesitated. "The tidings will hardly be glad ones to her, I am afraid."

Mr. Hoate frowned, and Virginia continued. "It must be evident to you how much Emily dislikes me."

"Then," replied Mr. Hoate, "she must readjust her views to accord with mine. I could not endure a discordant note in the harmony of my future household."

"I am glad to hear you say so," said Virginia. "Do you know she believes my affections for you are

ordered by a desire to become mistress of your house and the beautiful objects it contains?"

"You don't say so," he ejaculated.

"Indeed," she answered, "only yesterday she addressed me in a most unbridled fashion, when I was examining the famous Benvenuto Cellini Salt-cellar in the drawing-room."

"Impossible!"

"I had barely taken it in my hands when she flared up with the utmost violence."

Mr. Hoate shook his head. "I sometimes fear her mental balance is disordered," he said, "especially where the Cellini Salt-cellar is concerned. I fancy the immense value of the piece hypnotizes her. As a child she spent hour after hour gazing at it."

"But even so," persisted Virginia, "she is hardly justified in accusing me of wishing to marry an old man for what I could get out of him."

"She said that?" demanded Mr. Hoate, grimly.

"Her very words."

"Then my mind is made up. On the day of our marriage Emily leaves this house for good and all."

Now this was the target Virginia had been aiming at. Nevertheless she exclaimed, with an admirable suggestion of concern,

"Oh, I trust no words of mine are responsible for your decision?"

"No, no," said Mr. Hoate, "I should have acted similarly in any case. Please wait here and I will advise her of my resolve at once." And with a courteous bow he left the room.

The door had no sooner closed than a violent movement of the curtains took place and Emily stepped out into the room.

"You pig," she said, "you hateful, greedy pig!"

Virginia spun round at the words.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You were listening, were you?"

Emily's usually white face was scarlet with indignation, and the veins in her high forehead throbbed visibly.

"Marry him, if you like," she gasped, "but you won't get what you are after. I'll smash, or hide, or sink every valuable in the place. I will — I will! Yes, if I have to burn down the house to do it." And to lend colour to her words she swept the Sèvres clock and two Dresden figures, which were on the mantelpiece, into the grate.

The noise of their fall brought Mr. Hoate hurrying to the spot, and there followed a scene in which recriminations of so essentially a domestic character were employed, that it would be a breach of good taste to chronicle them in these pages.

The decision arrived at was that Emily should leave the house in four days' time, and Mr. Hoate also seconded a resolution, proposed by Virginia, that the objects of the greatest value, including the Cellini Salt-cellar, should be placed in the iron safe until the danger had departed.

During the two days following nothing of importance appeared to happen. Emily was sullen and morose, but showed no disposition to display her

violent moods. A careful observer might have noticed, however, that her hands were not of their usual whiteness, but showed characteristics more presumably to be seen in persons employed in labours of an agricultural kind.

Also a very young maid-servant, who did the upstairs rooms, noticed Emily's bed had not been slept in on either night. Being unimaginative she kept the knowledge to herself and apparently forgot all about it.

Mr. Hoate himself slept the sounder for knowing he would soon be relieved of the disquieting presence of his daughter. He slept so soundly, in fact, that he never even stirred when, in the early hours of the second night, Emily stole into his room and slipping her hand beneath his pillow, took therefrom his watch and chain, to which the key of the safe was attached.

Having done so she retired noiselessly, and was absent for perhaps half an hour. She then returned, replaced the watch, chain, and key exactly as she found it, and left the room for the second time.

At breakfast on the following morning Emily spoke for the first time.

"I am going out in a boat," she said.

"Why?" asked her father.

"Because I want to," came the uncompromising reply.

The next time Mr. Hoate saw her she was getting into a cab with a large parcel.

"What's in that?" he asked.

"Lunch," she replied.

He heard her instruct the driver to proceed to one of the quays, and heaved a sigh of relief at the prospect of a peaceful day with the fair Virginia.

When Emily returned, in the late afternoon, the house was in a state of turmoil. Mr. Hoate had been to the safe and found it empty. Her arrival was the cue for a chorus of threats and enquiries.

Emily laughed shrilly, and there was a suggestion of insanity in the sound.

"Look for them at the bottom of the river," she cried. "You saw the parcel I was carrying — I haven't got it now."

"The Cellini Salt-cellar?" shouted Mr. Hoate, gripping her by the shoulders.

"Look at the bottom of the river," was the answer she made. The doctor was summoned and certified that Miss Emily Hoate's mental equilibrium had entirely failed, and she would thereafter become a hopeless imbecile.

Mr. Hoate looked at the bottom of the river. Indeed he spent nearly two thousand pounds in having the many wharps and channels dragged, but his search was unrewarded even by the discovery of the mysterious package which Emily had been carrying.

This fact was scarcely surprising as Emily, unseen by the cabman, had pitched it into a dustcart as her vehicle passed slowly by.

Shortly afterwards she was admitted to Chidhurst Asylum, and so is lost to our view.

Mr. Hoate's marriage to Virginia never took place, for by some mental process of his own he attributed

the misfortunes which had befallen him to her agency.

In the course of time he died, leaving everything to charity, all his relatives being deceased.

The house and garden, which latter occupied half an acre and was much overgrown with shrubs, were sold to a building society, who pulled down the house and covered the entire area with cheap little dwellings and shops.

In the year 1896 the property was purchased by Mr. Simon Caleb, dealer in antiques and porcelain, for the price of two thousand five hundred pounds.

. . . . . .

Mr. Palliser, late of the firm of Palliser and Tonge (a partnership which ended in bankruptcy), had fallen upon bad days. Somehow, no one seemed to appreciate him, which, in consideration of the fact that his knowledge on the subject of curios and early Oriental ware was of rare quality, brought about in his mind a condition bordering upon melancholia.

His unfortunate association with Simon Caleb, wherein he and the latter-named gentleman had sought to defraud Lord Louis Lewis in the matter of an eggshell plate, and, their plans failing, had attacked each other with such violence that they underwent a term of imprisonment for fourteen days, had done little to stimulate his prestige.

Mr. Palliser never forgave the noble lord for having had the better of him, and cherished the ambition of turning the tables to his own advantage and Lord Louis' discomfiture.

During this period, when his fortunes were at their

lowest, he was constantly visited by dreams in which he held Lord Louis at his mercy at the top of an abyss, but ever at the critical moment when he was about to project him into the yawning depths below, by some accident of chance their positions were reversed, and he himself went hurtling through the air, to wake with a start and find himself on the floor by his own bedside.

His financial embarrassment being very acute, Mr. Palliser had sub-let one of the back rooms in his small house to an old man who, earlier in life, had been an attendant at Chidhurst Asylum. Now, there is nothing very extraordinary about that, but incidentally to this fact are due the various occurrences which it is the narrator's purpose to set forth.

One morning when scanning the columns of the *Bristol Observer* Mr. Palliser's attention was attracted to a paragraph, reprinted from an issue of many years before. The *Bristol Observer* was rather given to *réchauffé*. Doubtless, they felt, these reprinted articles from the dead seasons lent colour to the claim of being the oldest established newspaper in the city.

The particular paragraph which attracted Mr. Palliser's notice bore upon the loss Mr. Hoate had sustained. It cordially sympathized with the unhappy gentleman for his daughter's act of wantonness. It deplored the irreplaceable loss of the Cellini Salt-cellar: "An object of such beauty — to quote from Benvenuto's own biography — that 'The King cried aloud in astonishment, and could not look at it

long enough.' " Mr. Hoate's systematic dragging of the river was dwelt upon at great length. " Certain theorists," continued the writer, " would not believe Miss Emily Hoate threw it into the water. Basing their hypotheses on the fact that from infancy upwards the Salt-cellar had exercised an extraordinary fascination upon her, they could not believe, even though insane, she would have thrown it away. It is far more likely, they urged, she buried it in some remote place known only to herself." Mr. Palliser scratched his head. " One could understand," pursued the writer, " she might have thrown away the pieces of old Georgean silver, taken from the safe at the same time, although the small branch candelabra (mentioned earlier in the article) was supposed to have been one of the finest in the land, but to deprive the world of such a priceless treasure as the Benvenuto Cellini Salt-cellar is well-nigh impossible to credit." The writer concluded with the words: " The matter will always remain a mystery — a mystery locked behind the iron gates of insanity of which there is no key."

Bracketed at the bottom of the article and under the heading of " Deaths " was printed: " At Chidhurst Asylum, on the twenty-first of January, 1876, Miss Emily Hoate, daughter of the late Albert Hoate, Esq., of the city of Bristol, in her forty-seventh year."

Mr. Palliser laid the paper on his knee and fixed his eyes on the fly-specked gas globe.

" That bit of land where Hoate's house stood be-

longs to Caleb now," he mused. "Funny!" His eyes reverted to the paper.

"Chidhurst Asylum. What do I know about Chidhurst Asylum? Nothing. Wait a bit, though!" He rose to his feet and stuck his head through the door.

"Fenning," he shouted, "Mr. Fenning!"

"'Ullo," came the gruff response.

"Come down here a minnit," invited Palliser.

"Whaffor?"

"'Ave a glass of beer."

There followed a shuffle of feet, a clatter on the staircase, and Mr. Fenning, a seedy-looking individual of indeterminate old age, projected himself into the room.

"Where is it?" he said, with a glance which embraced all quarters of the room.

"Want to ask you something first," said Palliser.

"Then 'urry up," replied the senior man, anxious to get to business.

"Didn't you tell me you was at Chidhurst Asylum?"

"Yes — attendant there."

"Ever remember one of the inmates called Emily Hoate?"

"Don't think so — where's that ——"

Mr. Palliser cut in before the sentence was finished.

"She was the one that chucked all those valuables in the river. Don't you remember?"

Mr. Fenning concentrated for a moment. "Wait a bit," he said, "yes, I do. Emily Hoate — that's

right! Used to grub about in the garden. Died six years after I come to the place."

"Could you picture what she looked like?" asked Palliser.

"Might, if I tried."

"Good!" said Palliser, rubbing his hands.

"Now where's that beer?" demanded Mr. Fenning.

"Isn't any beer," replied Palliser.

"What!" exclaimed the other, much outraged.

"But there might be," continued Palliser. "There might be a lot of it. All right, I don't want anything else."

"I reckon you ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Fenning, and withdrew muttering.

But Mr. Palliser's mind was too absorbed with other matters to notice it. He picked up the paper from the floor and glanced at a certain passage — "far more likely she buried it in some remote place known only to herself."

"And why not," he murmured, "why not? What remote place? The garden? Of course, the garden! Old Fenning was there when she died — he could bear out the story. Confessed to him she had buried 'em in the garden — in a deep hole."

Simon Caleb owned that garden now and five small houses stood upon it with little gardens of their own. If that piece of ground actually contained the Cellini Salt-cellar it would be worth an enormous sum of money. Obviously it contained nothing of the kind, but there was no reason to prevent one saying it did.

Mr. Palliser rose and put on his hat. He would call upon Caleb — extend the hand of friendship and enter into a second association with him to their mutual advantage.

As he approached Simon Caleb's abode Mr. Palliser was oppressed with doubts as to the reception he would be accorded. Consequently he decided to cast his eye over the late Hoate property before calling upon its present owner. This property was about three or four streets away from where Caleb dwelt.

On arriving there Palliser was much astonished to find all the houses which stood upon its triangular area were untenanted. The lower windows had been boarded up, while the upper ones had in every case been smashed, as a neighbourly attention from the small boys of the district.

Mr. Palliser stepped into a small grocery store, facing this scene of desolation, and, on the pretext of buying a pennyworth of People's Mixed, enquired the reason for this wholesale evacuation.

"Condemned by the sanitary inspector," replied the grocer. "They was always a rotten lot of houses. Be a good job if they pulled 'em down," he added.

"Is the plot for sale?" Palliser asked.

"'Bleeve so. But it won't fetch much — lucky if they touch fifteen 'undred for it. Property round here 'as gorn down terruble."

"I suppose so," said Palliser. "Well, good afternoon," and he retreated from the shop.

Once outside, he said to himself, "Fifteen hundred pounds! If I had the money I'm dashed if I wouldn't risk it — but I haven't the money, so we'll see what old Caleb has to say."

Mr. Palliser presented himself boldly to his former colleague, who was fussing about behind the counter of his dusty little shop.

Realizing the value of making a good impression, he spoke at once.

"Caleb," he said, "I come as a friend."

"Then all I can say," replied Caleb, amazed that the other should have ventured to enter his castle, "is I don't want friends of your sort."

"Look here," said Palliser, "I know how you feel, I've felt the same way myself, but what I suggest is this: for half an hour we talk together as one business man to another, and if at the end of that time we haven't come to no understanding we can go back to the old footing, and no harm done."

"What have you got to say?" demanded Simon, grudgingly.

"Can we go into the parlour?" asked Palliser.

Simon did not answer, but led the way and left Palliser to follow. When they were seated Palliser spoke.

"You know that bit of land you got up Hardwick Street way?"

"I ought to know it," assented the other.

"You want to sell it?"

"What I want to do and what I can do are different things."

"They tell me down there you'd be lucky to touch fifteen hundred for it."

"Put it this way," said Caleb, "I'll let you have it for fifteen 'undred."

Palliser leant back in his chair. "Suppose I could show you a way to get fifteen thousand for it, how much would it be worth to me?"

"The age o' miracles is past," grunted Simon, "and I for one never did believe in 'em."

"I'm talkin' of possibilities," said Palliser. "How much would it be worth to me?"

Simon scrutinized him narrowly. In spite of his dislike for Palliser he held a kind of respect for the ingenuity of his schemes. Palliser was a man of ideas, even if his ideas did not always mature successfully.

"Depends," he answered, guardedly. "I always reckon that piece of ground is worth fifteen thousand; especially if they put up that factory they were talking about."

This last remark was inspired by the belief that Palliser had heard some information he himself had been denied.

However, the shaft was an empty one.

Palliser smiled. "It was worth trying," he said, "but there is nothing doing in that direction, and you know it. Give me an answer to my question."

Simon considered—"Well," he said, "after deducting the four thousand I paid for the property I might give you ten per cent."

"You might," replied Palliser, "but you won't.

To begin with you paid two thousand five hundred."

"So I did, now I come to think of it," said Simon.

"Allowing you an extra two-fifty, over and above that, I propose we share any profits arising."

"Share?" exclaimed Simon.

"Share," returned Palliser; "and if you think of going into the deal we'll have it down on paper right away."

As Mr. Caleb could not see any possibility of recovering more than a thousand pounds on his original investment, he accepted the terms with more alacrity than Palliser had conceived to be likely. Therewith a deed was drafted, signed, and a copy retained by both parties.

Then Palliser set forth the principles of his plan.

"We both have a score to settle with Lord Louis," he said, "and this is the way to do it."

"How d' you mean?" said Simon.

"Don't you see? If he got wind that the Benvenuto Cellini Salt-cellar was buried where the garden used to be, he'd pay anything to get the property."

"But it ain't there," said Simon, meditatively. "It's at the bottom of the sea."

"I know that," replied Palliser, "but no one saw her throw it into the water. Besides, that's where old Fenning comes in."

"'Ow's he come in?" queried Simon, not easily convinced.

"This way," said Palliser, expanding his theme. "Fenning was at the asylum when Emily Hoate died. She took a fancy to Fenning, and just before she died,

come to her senses and confessed she buried the things in the 'eart of a shrubbery in the middle of the back garden. Dug a terrible big hole and dropped the goods inside."

Simon Caleb interrupted, "Why a *big* hole?"

"Less likely to have been disturbed when the builders put up the houses afterwards." Caleb nodded, and Palliser continued, "Then all we've got to do is to let Lord Louis hear the story from Fenning and put up the property for auction."

"Yes, but 'ow are you goin' to explain the fact that Fenning never told the story before?"

"That's easy," replied Palliser. "He was a simple man — knew nothing about the story and thought she was still balmy — forgot all about it until he read the paragraph in today's paper."

"Then why'd he tell Lord Louis?" persisted Simon.

"You leave that to me. I'll manage it all right."

Simon rubbed his chin, thoughtfully, "It's a good idea, Palliser," he said, "a beautiful idea — if it comes off."

"It will come off," replied Palliser, with great assurance. "But some'ow," he added, "we shall have to keep your name out of it. If he knew you had anything to do with the property he'd smell a rat at once."

"That's all right," said Caleb. "I bought the property in my own name, Lewis Heughes. I took the name of Caleb when I went into the antique business."

"That's a bit of luck," said Palliser. "Then you'll leave it to me to set the ball rolling," and he extended a hand with great cordiality.

Caleb ignored the hand.

"I don't see any particular call to shake hands," he said. "I'm doin' this to make a bit o' money, not a friend."

"Just as you like," replied Palliser. "I'll let you know how things are going on," and with a wave of the hand he departed.

And Mr. Caleb turned back into his shop and wondered how they would.

On his homeward way Palliser matured the scheme in his brain. He must devise some natural means of getting the story of the buried salt-cellar to the ears of Lord Louis. If Fenning called at his lordship's house and started forthwith to relate the imaginary confession of Miss Emily Hoate, suspicion and doubts would be raised. Clearly this was an important point.

Then, of course, Fenning must be carefully primed and rehearsed in the part he would have to play. He was quite a shrewd old fellow, and would address himself to the task with enthusiasm so long as he saw prospects of easily earned monies.

Palliser decided that three pounds from Caleb's pocket would suffice for telling the tale, after which if the scheme developed satisfactorily he should receive one per cent. on the profits.

Later in the evening he offered these terms to the

old man who, after the requisite degree of protest, accepted them with secret satisfaction.

. . . . . .

As luck would have it, on the very next morning Fate played a card into the conspirator's hand; but it required the keen intelligence of a Palliser to grasp the fact.

The *Bristol Observer* published a letter from Mr. Russell Yorke touching on the Hoate mystery.

In this letter Mr. Yorke advanced certain theories of his own as to the probable actions of Miss Emily Hoate.

There is no value in repeating these theories as they have no bearing on our narrative. Mr. Yorke was that kind of individual who, for want of more vital employment, lavished much energy in composing letters to the Press.

Now Palliser knew that Mr. Yorke was a particular crony of Lord Louis'. Their interests were both centred on objects of artistic merit. The main difference between the two gentlemen was that, whereas Lord Louis' income was very large, Mr. Yorke's was correspondingly small.

Palliser argued that if the tidings of the whereabouts of the Cellini Salt-cellar were brought to Mr. Yorke's ears he would at once convey them to his richer friend.

And what could be more natural than for Fenning, who had read Mr. Yorke's letter and the article of the previous day, and, as a result, had recalled the

conversation he had had with Emily Hoate, to call upon Mr. Yorke and tell the tale to him?

. . . . . .

Two days later Mr. Russell Yorke burst in upon Lord Louis Lewis at a moment when the latter was inspecting a very delicate specimen of "Peach Bloom."

Abandoning all formality, he spluttered out:

"The Cellini Salt-cellar is found."

"One moment," said Lord Louis, replacing the beautiful vase in its appointed position, then turned and exclaimed, "Good Heavens! You don't say so?"

"Perhaps it is premature to use the word 'found,'" admitted Mr. Yorke, "but I have excellent reason to believe it will be."

Lord Louis smiled indulgently. "I read your theories in the paper," he observed, "and I am bound to confess ——"

But Mr. Yorke interrupted.

"No, no," he said, "it has nothing to do with them; but a man called on me today —" and thereupon he related the interview he had had with Fenning.

Lord Louis rose and paced the room.

"This is indeed interesting," he said. "Would this man have any advantage in telling the story if there were nothing in it?"

"That is what I thought," agreed Mr. Yorke.

"What kind of a person is he?"

"Of the upper lower class."

"Then, I suppose, he was looking to make something for himself?" queried Lord Louis.

"No," replied the other. "He said that he was a poor man and, naturally, would be glad of a reward if his information proved correct."

Lord Louis nodded. "That seems reasonable," said he. "Let us run over the points. Fenning claims to have been an attendant at Chidhurst Asylum. One day he comes upon Emily Hoate digging in the grounds — asked what she is doing she replies with a tale about burying a famous Cellini Salt-cellar at a great depth in her father's garden. She describes the garden with more clearness than Fenning believed her capable of, nevertheless he pays little heed, believing her to be suffering from hallucinations. A day or two later she dies, and the subject only recurs to his mind when he chances to read the article, followed by your letter, in the *Bristol Observer*."

Mr. Yorke nodded, and Lord Louis continued:

"I will get a trunk call to Chidhurst Asylum," he said. "We can verify some of the details. I know one of the doctors there, who told me they have kept a register of all the inmates since the institution opened with details of their various characteristics," and leaving his cigarette case beside Mr. Yorke, he went from the room and was absent several minutes.

"There was an attendant at the Asylum named Fenning," he said on his return, "and what is more important the register records that towards the end of her life Emily Hoate was obsessed with a passion for digging."

Mr. Yorke rubbed his hands in satisfaction. "You credit Fenning's story, then?" he asked.

Lord Louis nodded. "Do you know anything about the Hoate estate?" he demanded.

"My father pointed it out to me when I was a boy. The original house and garden, for the property has since been built over, occupied a three-cornered piece of ground at a point where two roads converged. A shorter road ran between one and the other, forming the base of the triangle."

"I see," mused Lord Louis. "Then if she buried the treasure in the *middle* of the garden it may well be there still, undisturbed by the building operations which subsequently took place. Not that the point is important, for had the Benvenuto Cellini Salt-cellar been recovered the world would have known."

"A most concise piece of reasoning," applauded Mr. Yorke.

"I will order the car," said Lord Louis, "and we will take a look at the place at once."

Passing the front-door a few minutes later Lord Louis had an inspiration, and turning to the butler said "Badger, get a trunk call to Mr. Cedric Milwood and ask whether he is employing a servant who was once in the service of Mr. Albert Hoate."

"Mr. Albert Hoate, m' lord — certainly, m' lord," replied Badger, and gave the chauffeur a sign to proceed.

Arrived at their destination they descended from the car. Lord Louis' brow contracted on seeing the untenanted houses.

"I don't like the look of this," he said. "It suggests that the landlord may have circulated this story to inflate the price of a very unsalable property."

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Yorke, whose hopes were easily dashed.

"We will make some inquiries," said Lord Louis, and together they entered the little grocery store.

Having made an insignificant purchase the nobleman asked if the houses opposite had recently been put up for sale."

"No," replied the grocer, "they've been for sale these last ten months or more. Mr. Mayne, the house agent, will give you any particulars."

"That looks better," said Lord Louis as they left the shop. "Let us see what Mr. Mayne has to say."

Shortly afterward they were interviewing that gentleman in person.

"I imagine my client, Mr. Heughes, would accept twelve hundred," he said. "The chances of his getting more are very small."

Lord Louis laid his card on the table. "Be so good as to communicate your client's views to that address," he begged. "I might be disposed to make an offer."

Mr. Mayne, who was much impressed by the name of Lord Louis Lewis, gave assurance that the matter should receive his immediate attention.

On their return home they found the butler at the telephone.

"Hold on," said that dignitary, "his lordship has just come in." Then, addressing Lord Louis, "I

have only just got through, m' lord. Would you care to speak. Mrs. Milwood is at the other end."

Lord Louis picked up the receiver. "Is that you, Sarah?" he said, "Louis speaking. Yes, very well, thank you. And you? Didn't you tell me the other day you had an old servant of Albert Hoate's with you? Yes, I thought you did. The wife of your lodgekeeper. May I drive over in the morning and have a word with her? What? Of course, I meant after I had paid my respects to you. Yes, lunch will be delightful. No, not so eccentric as you imagine. Good-bye!" and he rang off.

"You were right, then?" said Mr. Yorke.

"Yes. The old woman may recall something. We must be thorough above all else." With that Lord Louis lit a cigarette and smiled, and Mr. Yorke, who knew that smile, could see that his friend was pleased with the progress of events.

On the following morning Lord Louis' car conveyed him to his nephew's estate. Little Mrs. Sarah, who had been a bride for three months, greeted him with a whole-hearted cordiality which never failed to awaken in his being grave doubts as to whether his nephew was worthy of her affection. He experienced the greatest difficulty in preserving a correct avuncular attitude when chance left them alone together. Of this fact Sarah was well aware, and took a fiendish delight in "uncle-ing" him in a most distracting manner.

Lord Louis asked permission to present himself at

once to the lodge-keeper's wife, whose name was Mrs. Fox.

"Oh, certainly," said Sarah, with an adorable pout, "but I don't think it is very nice of you, Uncle Louis, to want to spend the morning with the servants instead of with me."

Lord Louis protested that this was not the case, but he had some business with Mrs. Fox which admitted of no delay. Eventually Sarah put on a garden hat and together they strolled to the lodge.

Lord Louis had a winning way with him, and in no time Mrs. Fox, thoroughly at her ease, was reciting her reminiscences of the Hoate mystery.

"I was only a bit of a girl at the time," she said, "but I remember it as clearly as clearly. Such an upset you never saw. Mind you, I felt sorry for poor Miss Emily, I did, for if ever there was a scheming piece of goods it was that Miss Cremorne."

Lord Louis nodded sympathetically. "You think," said he, "that she threw the things into the river?"

"There's no doubt about it," replied the old lady. "It had got on her mind, you see. Those two nights after they was locked up in the safe she never slept a wink."

"How do you know that?" asked Lord Louis, pricking up his ears.

"I used to do her room, and the bed hadn't been slept in either night. She must have walked up and down — up and down."

Lord Louis considered. "I see," he said, then added, "Perhaps she lay down on the couch below stairs."

"No, she must have used her room and I'll tell you what makes me say so. There was dirty water in the basin on both mornings."

"Ah, very conclusive," murmured Lord Louis.

"In fact, I said to myself when I was emptying it — what 'as she been doing to get her hands in such a state?"

"What made you say that?"

"The water was just as if some one had washed their hands after potting out plants."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Lord Louis, springing to his feet. "Didn't you mention that fact to any one?"

"I can't remember that I ever did," responded Mrs. Fox.

Lord Louis was tingling with excitement. "Sarah," he said, "you must forgive me if I don't stay to lunch, but what this good lady has told me is of immense importance."

"You are not going to run away?" pleaded Sarah.

"I must, I must," he said; and less than an hour later was recounting to Mr. Yorke the amazing intelligence that on the two mornings following the locking up of the Cellini Salt-cellar in Mr. Hoate's safe Miss Emily had washed her hands and the water resembled that which might have been used by a person who had previously potted out plants.

After this there existed no doubt in the minds of either gentleman that the Cellini Salt-cellar actually reposed in a deep hole on the property of Mr. Lewis Heughes.

During the course of the day they received a communication from the agent to the effect that the late Hoate property was to be put up for public auction in about a fortnight's time.

Lord Louis sent for Fenning and, after presenting him with a five-pound note, enjoined him to preserve the strictest secrecy, explaining if the story became known there would be a terrific competition of dealers to become possessors of the property.

Mr. Fenning was quite touched by Lord Louis' gift and compared him favourably with his employer Palliser, from whom he had had the greatest difficulty in securing the three pounds contracted for. Indeed his anger had been so acute that if it had not been for the promise of one per cent. on the deal he would probably have exploded Palliser's plans by telling the truth to Lord Louis.

A day or two before the auction Caleb and Palliser held a conference. They were now sure of their prey, but determined to run no risks of Lord Louis' suspicions being aroused at the last moment.

"I don't see that there are any risks," grumbled Caleb. "We know from Fenning that he means to buy, so all we got to do is run up the price at the auction."

"Ah! That's where the danger lies," returned

Palliser, who thought of everything. "He's no fool is Lord Louis. He'll ask himself why the price is rising."

"That's true," said Caleb, scratching his musical-box chin.

"Why not send Fenning round to see him on the morning of the sale," suggested Palliser, "with a yarn of having had a drop too much the night before. He was in a crowded bar at the time with a lot of dealers in it and, although his memory isn't very clear, he's afraid he may have said something he didn't ought."

"Good!" assented Caleb. "Let it go at that."

Accordingly Fenning was rehearsed in his new part, and made his confession to Lord Louis at the appointed time.

Lord Louis took the news very well. "It is a pity," he said, "but probably no harm will have been done." Then, accompanied by Mr. Yorke, he entered his car and proceeded to the auction room.

. . . . . .

It is not the intention of the narrator to dwell upon the details of the sale. It suffices to say that the late Hoate estate was knocked down to a bid from Lord Louis Lewis of nine thousand pounds. From the moment the bidding started it was clear to his lordship that Fenning's ill-advised garrulity the night before had had its effect. The competition, or what was actually the running up by Mr. Palliser, had been very keen. At one point Lord Louis thought seriously of letting his unknown opponent have it,

and Palliser afterwards confessed that this was one of the nastiest moments in his career, and discouraged him from forcing the price any higher.

The title deeds were made over to the noble lord, and he took possession four days later.

The purchase money was divided into the appointed proportions and Caleb and Palliser, forgetting their previous enmity, laid in a stock of refreshments and indulged in a wine on a scale hitherto undreamed of. When partially returned to sobriety they were able to consider the more normal aspects of life and, among other things, came to the conclusion that one per cent. was far too high a commission to pay Fenning for his share in the transaction.

"Pay an ole man like that sixty-two pound ten?" argued Palliser. "Why, he wouldn't know what to do with it."

"That's right," agreed Caleb, "it's too much."

"I reckon a ten-pound note would be more than fair," said Palliser in conclusion.

In the meanwhile Lord Louis, assisted by Mr. Russell Yorke, was digging large holes in the open space at the rear of their newly acquired houses. Their enthusiasm was intense, but after three arduous days, unrewarded by any find, Mr. Yorke's spirits began to decline.

"There is no reason to despair," said Lord Louis, always philosophical. "It is probably lying under where one of these houses now stands. We have no definite authority for assuming it reposes in this open part. We will prosecute a careful search in the

open, and if that reveals nothing I will have the houses removed and we will search beneath them." So saying he began to dig again, with renewed energy.

During the afternoon Palliser and his partner let themselves into one of the empty houses and, standing well back so as not to be observed, spent an hour of agonizing mirth, watching the antics of the diggers below.

"It beats a play," gasped Palliser. "Blow me if I don't come here every day and watch. Never saw anything I liked better."

When Lord Louis and Mr. Yorke arrived home for dinner they were astonished to find Mr. Fenning waiting for them.

"You wonder why I'm 'ere," said Fenning. "I'll tell you. You've been swindled, you have. Done, you've been — done."

And thereupon he explained, detail for detail, how Palliser had worked the shameless deal. "He's a blackguard," cried Fenning, by way of conclusion, "one of the dirtiest blackguards un'ung! Promised me one per cent. on the profit, and then tries to square me orf with a tenner."

When Mr. Fenning had stopped from sheer exhaustion, Lord Louis spoke:

"Mr. Fenning," he said, "you can hardly expect sympathy from me. Through your agency I suffer a loss of nine thousand pounds. Caleb and Palliser bore me ill-will over an encounter we had in the past, thus their behaviour is more or less understandable. With you it is different — you had no score to settle.

Consequently, I regard your action as the more contemptible, and rejoice that this piece of poetic justice has been visited upon you. Kindly leave my house as quickly as you can."

And Fenning, with a chastened spirit, withdrew. He had scarcely closed the door, however, when the voice of Lord Louis arrested him.

"One moment," said the nobleman. "Did you inform Palliser or Caleb of your intention to tell me the truth."

"No — not yet," came the reply.

"Then do nothing of the kind. I desire they should think I am still of the belief that the Cellini Salt-cellar is buried in those grounds."

"All right," said Fenning, then added: "You may not know it, but them two spends their time laughing at you digging from a room in one of the empty houses."

"Thank you," said Lord Louis. "We will see if the laugh cannot be turned against them. Good night."

Mr. Yorke was desolate, and raved against the injustice that had been done.

"You will prosecute, of course," he said. "You will not allow this crime to go unpunished?"

Lord Louis rubbed his nose, a trick he had when thinking. Presently, he replied:

"Rest assured they shall be punished — fully."

Lord Louis spent the evening in a very peculiar way. There was a room at the top of the house in which was a large assortment of various odds and

ends, collected during his rambles in search of antiques. To this apartment he adjourned, eventually to emerge carrying two plated sugar dredgers and an old Sheffield candelabra, beautiful in design, but much ravaged by years.

These pieces he conveyed to what he was pleased to call his workshop. Arrived here he smeared them with acid, plastered them with dirt, and generally gave them an appearance of the utmost decay. It was past midnight before he had finished, when, instead of retiring to bed, he donned an overcoat and, making a parcel of the three pieces of plate, let himself out of the house.

Hailing a late taxi he told the driver to proceed to Hardwick Street. He alighted at the corner, and, bidding the man wait, vanished up a narrow alley way between two of his recently acquired houses and so was lost to view. He was gone about twenty minutes, and when he returned it was noticeable that he no longer carried the parcel.

The next morning he called at Mr. Yorke's house.

"Come along," he said, "we must begin digging at once."

"Digging," exclaimed Mr. Yorke. "What ever for?"

"One never knows," replied Lord Louis, and carried off his friend, mildly protesting, to the scene of their excavations.

Before leaving the car he addressed a few words to the chauffeur. "You should have no difficulty in recognizing them," he said. "One is a tall man, the

other a short. They will enter one of the houses, when you will give two blasts of the horn."

In face of what had been told them by Fenning, Mr. Yorke was most unwilling to dig, but Lord Louis wore down his resistance.

About an hour and a half later, when the earth was flying from their busy spades, they heard the signal blasts from the motor-horn.

"Which means," remarked Lord Louis, "that the gentlemen responsible for this swindle are enjoying a joke at our expense. In other words, are watching us from one of these windows."

Mr. Yorke threw down his spade. "Then I dig no more," he exclaimed, emphatically.

"On the contrary," exclaimed Lord Louis, "you will dig with renewed energy. With your permission we will break the ground in a new spot," and, so saying, he began a fresh hole a few yards away.

"By cripes!" exploded Palliser, nudging Caleb in the ribs, "Did you ever see the like?"

"Laughable isn't the word," responded Caleb, applying a match to his pipe.

They gave themselves over to ten minutes of unadulterated bliss, whilst the nobleman and his friend attacked the soil beneath. Then, of a sudden, came up to them a cry of astonishment from Mr. Yorke. They saw him stoop and take from the hole he had been digging a small metal object about seven inches high.

"Good Heavens! Lord Louis," he cried, "look what I have found!"

They saw Lord Louis take the object in his hand and examine it carefully. Most of what he said was inaudible, but they caught the words "There were a pair of Sheffield dredgers; no doubt this is one of them." The rest of the conversation was inaudible as the two below linked arms and walked up and down gesticulating excitedly.

Verly slowly Palliser and Caleb turned their eyes of each other, and the colour of their faces was an ashy grey.

"Gor!" said Caleb in a husky whisper.

"She hid the plate at the same time as — as the other. Goin' down to the river was a blind. It — it's *there*."

Caleb's tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth.

"That Cellini Salt-cellar's worth hundreds of thousands of pounds — hundreds of thousands! Gor! And we parted with it for nine."

The sweat was standing in beads on Palliser's brow.

"Something'll have to be done," he said.

Meanwhile Lord Louis had summoned his chauffeur and dispatched him on an errand. Presently he returned with another person, who looked like an ordinary navvy, but was, in reality, his lordship's valet, disguised for a special purpose.

"Now look here, my man," they heard Lord Louis say, "I want you to keep an eye on this ground while we are away. Don't let any one trespass. You understand?" The man nodded. "Here's five shillings for your trouble. We shall be back in about

an hour." Lord Louis took Mr. Yorke by the arm and together they made their way to the waiting automobile, the nobleman remarking, as he passed the window where the two conspirators were in hiding, "This arrangement will do for the moment, but we must have a permanent guard on the premises night and day. I will send Edwards and Kendall in the meanwhile."

No sooner were they out of sight than Palliser spoke.

"Caleb," he whispered, "it's our only chance. We must get that fellar out of the way right now. If the rest is in that hole we could get it out, with luck, before they come back. Come on," and, dragging the hapless Caleb after him, they debouched into the garden.

"'Ullo!" exclaimed the new custodian, "wot d' you want?"

"We're friends of the gentleman who's just gone," replied Palliser. "He asked us to say as you needn't wait."

"In fact that you wasn't to," added Caleb.

The custodian scratched his head. "Gentleman give me five shilluns to stop," he said.

"My friend'll give you ten to go away, won't you Caleb?"

"I suppose so," grunted Caleb, always sensitive where money was concerned.

"Now, you're torkin'," said the man, with outstretched hand.

When the coin had changed hands Caleb said,

"You can come back in three-quarters of an hour — see!"

"Rightoh!" replied the man, and mooched away.

No sooner had he passed from view than Caleb and Palliser grabbed the spades and began to dig with feverish haste. Barely a couple of minutes passed before Caleb's spade struck against a hard object, and a much-battered Sheffield sugar-dredger was thrown upon the mound of earth beside them.

"This makes the pair to the one they found!" cried Caleb.

"Don't stop!" gasped Palliser, plying his spade furiously.

He had scarcely spoken when the displaced earth revealed the branch candelabra Lord Louis had so carefully prepared the night before. "We're finding the stuff," gasped Palliser. "This 'ere bit is the one they spoke of in the paper. Come on."

"Wait a minute," warned Caleb. "Let's hide it away in case they comes back. This dus'bin'll do."

They were turning away from the dustbin, after closing the lid, when confronted by the unwelcome reappearance of the custodian.

"Told you to go away," shouted Palliser.

"I know," replied Lord Louis' valet, "but there's a couple of blokes comin' down the road. They'll be the guard 'e was puttin' in to look after the place."

"Out of it!" spluttered Caleb, and, followed by his partner in crime, beat a hurried retreat by way of a southern exit.

Lord Louis' valet grinned, and watched them disappear.

"His lordship said I was to turn over the ground and make sure they had found it all right," he reflected. "Well, let's see!" and picking up a spade he began to dig.

"A dam bit of luck," gasped Caleb, when they had placed a quarter of a mile between them and the late Hoate estate. "Another ten minutes and we'd have found the thing. A dam bit of luck."

"Look here, Caleb," said Palliser, "it's no good. S'posin' we had found it — wouldn't have been any use. Stolen property — see what I mean? We wouldn't ha' got the price of old gold even if we'd found a fence to take it off us." Caleb realized the truth of this statement with a shock. "Only one thing to do," continued Palliser, "we must buy back the land."

"Tss!" exclaimed Caleb. "Would 'e sell? Not him."

"Donno, but it's our only chance." He pondered for a moment, then burst out: "I got an idea!"

"You always 'ave," grumbled Caleb.

"Lord Louis is a man of honour — and I believe it'll work. We must get to the bank at once and take out the money he paid us and a bit over beside."

"You 'aven't got any more," argued Caleb.

"No, but you have. It's kill or cure. I'll explain my meaning on the way."

. . . . . .

Lord Louis was finishing lunch when the butler

entered to ask if he would see a Mr. Caleb and a Mr. Palliser.

"Tell them to wait," said Lord Louis. Then addressing Mr. Yorke — whose feelings had been greatly lacerated on learning the rich seam he had struck had been salted by his friend the night before — he said, "The fish are rising to our first cast." He rose and led the way to the smoking-room, where the two dealers were waiting. They came to their feet as Lord Louis and Mr. Yorke entered.

"Well," said Lord Louis coldly, "and what can I do for you?"

"We have something to say," replied Palliser, who was always spokesman, "and we hope your lordship will hear us out with tolerance and generosity."

"You will be able to judge of that after the interview," said Lord Louis. "Sit down and proceed!"

"A week ago," said Palliser, "your lordship bought a plot of land from my friend Caleb, here."

"What?" exclaimed Lord Louis, with an affectation of extreme surprise. "I did no such thing. The name of the last owner was Heughes — Lewis Heughes."

"That's me," said Caleb.

"I see," replied Lord Louis, icily. "The name you took, I presume, for purpose of deception."

"No, no, my lord," cried Caleb. "It's my lawful name and my mother's before me."

Lord Louis raised his eyebrows and Palliser proceeded.

"Caleb and I had a joint interest in that land and

we put it up for auction. Much to our surprise, we found you had bought it, at a figure beyond any we had believed possible. The most we were looking for was a couple of thousand — and instead you buy it for nine — and why? That's what we ask ourselves, WHY?"

"I trust you found a satisfactory explanation," cut in Mr. Yorke.

"We found an explanation," replied Palliser, with a sad inflection, "but could hardly call it satisfactory. We heard, on'y this morning, that Lord Louis had received secret information, from a man named Fenning, that the famous Benvenuto Cellini Salt-cellar, lost in 1860, was buried there. We made inquiries and heard the truth from the lips of Fenning himself."

Lord Louis smiled.

"Ah, you may smile, Lord Louis," pursued Palliser, "but I ask you, as one gentleman to another, was it playing the game? Was it the square thing to do?" At this point Caleb was constrained to wipe emotional moisture from his nose. "Was it the true act of a gentleman for a rich man like yourself to take advantage of two poor dealers who have their children's welfare to consider and their livings to get? I ask you that question, my lord, and await your answer."

Lord Louis was amazed at this piece of profound effrontery; but he did not betray the fact.

"Mr. Palliser," said he, "your words touch me to the very quick. I see myself now as others see me.

You, yourselves, must know that we collectors are all too ready, in the excitement of the chase, to forget our ethical obligations to the rest of mankind. I beg you to tell me by what means I can make reparation?"

A transport of joy passed through the beings of Caleb and Palliser, depriving them of expression. Eventually Palliser found the words to say:

"We have brought the money with us, and ask your lordship to sell us back the land at the price you paid."

Lord Louis considered the point without answering, then said: "I risked nine thousand pounds on an off-chance of finding this Salt-cellar. You, on the other hand, apparently know that it is there."

"Your lordship knows that too," put in Caleb.

"It may not be," said Lord Louis, with surprising frankness. "However, if you consider your information justifies you in making the purchase I will sell you the land for ten thousand."

"Oh come!" protested Palliser.

"For ten thousand pounds — and Mr. Yorke shall judge if the price is fair."

"Too fair — most generous," assented that gentleman.

Caleb and Palliser exchanged glances, then Caleb nodded and produced a roll of notes. "We accept the terms," said Palliser. "Providing your lordship makes over the property to us at once."

Lord Louis nodded assent and seated himself at his writing-table. "I will give a note to that effect,"

he said, "and our lawyers can attend to the legal transfer afterwards. It is now one fifty-five. I shall write here that you enter possession at two o'clock." He wrote for a few moments in silence, then gave the paper, together with the title deeds of the estate, to Palliser; who, after examining them minutely, handed Lord Louis ten thousand pounds in notes.

They were on the point of retiring when the butler entered.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but your lordship's valet wished to speak to you very particular."

"Show him in," said the nobleman.

When the erstwhile navvy was shown in Caleb and Palliser looked very uncomfortable.

"I did not know your lordship was engaged," said the man, eyeing Palliser and Caleb with suspicion.

"You can speak quite openly before these gentlemen," remarked Lord Louis. "What do you wish to say?"

"Only that I had carried out your lordship's instructions," was the reply.

"Meaning," said Lord Louis, "that you dug over the ground, after these gentlemen had gone, and found they had taken the candelabra I buried."

"What?" "You buried!!" screamed Palliser and Caleb in unison.

"Yes," replied the man. "I also came across something else while I was digging," and he placed on the table a bundle, rough-covered in sacking.

"What is that?" asked Lord Louis.

"I couldn't say," replied the valet, removing the

wrapping and revealing a little arrangement of two figures, oval in form and about thirteen inches high, and much ingrained with dirt.

"Great Heavens! The Cellini Salt-cellar!" gasped Mr. Yorke.

Followed a moment of breathless silence — then, with a scream, Caleb and Palliser rushed forward.

"It's ours," they shouted. But Lord Louis barred the way.

"No," he cried, in a voice of thunder. "You take possession at two o'clock."

"Ting — ting!" came from the little timepiece on the mantelshelf.

Lord Louis caught the sound. "The estate is now yours — and all that pertains thereto — above and below," he said. "Wallace, Badger! Show these gentlemen out. I wish you both a very good afternoon."

And Caleb and Palliser, frothing at the mouth and vowing vengeance most awful, were projected down the steps of the house, and heard the front-door bang behind them.

. . . . . .

"I shall present it to the nation," said Lord Louis, when a few days later he and Mr. Yorke were poring over the golden subtleties of Cellini's masterpiece. "It is a gift from the Gods, and far too beautiful for any one man to have and hold. By the way, I returned that extra thousand pounds to Simon Caleb. One must not be too great an opportunist."

NOTE: To forestall criticism on the part of the learned, it

may be stated that the salt-cellar referred to in the story was undoubtedly from the hand of Cellini. This is proved by a curious record retained in the Hoate family, which consists of a MS. copy (in a later script) of a passage in the account book of Dame Alice — the wife of Sir Roger Hoate, who was contemporary with Benvenuto. The original account book was lost when Hoate Hall was sacked by the Roundheads. From the MS. copy, however, it is clear that Cellini fashioned the salt-cellar at the French Court.

The enthusiasm displayed by Francis I. for the original wax model prompted Cellini (whose moral sense had ever been somewhat elastic) to conceal the existence of the Hoate Salt-cellar from the King. Thus the salt-cellar made for Francis I. (and now at Vienna) was of posterior date, and can only be regarded as a replica of the one so long treasured in the Hoate family.

This note is on the authority of H. W. F.

CHAPTER VI

THE GAUTAMA BUDDHA

THE early part of this story happened some little while before the events recounted in the last chapter.

A few weeks before the wedding of the Hon. Cedric Milwood, a nephew of Lord Louis Lewis, to Miss Sarah Sedgewick, the ensuing conversation took place. Lord Louis had invited the happy twain to lunch, and after the repast was over Cedric, who had some business to transact with his solicitor, left his fiancée and his uncle to have a quiet chat together.

Lord Louis had drawn up his chair to the fire, and Sarah, with that disregard for convention which composed one of her chief charms, had plumped herself down on the bearskin rug, and resting her chin on his knees announced her intention of having a nice "cosy old talk."

"I am glad Cedric had to see his lawyer," she exclaimed, drawing up her feet beneath her. "It will be lovely to have an hour all to ourselves."

Lord Louis moved rather uneasily in his chair; "Cedric will soon be back," he remarked rather lamely.

"Then we mustn't lose a moment," declared Sarah. "We'll get to business at once. Now, Uncle Louis,

what are you going to give me for a wedding present?"

Lord Louis felt quite relieved on learning what the business was. "Anything you like," he replied.

"How lovely," cried Sarah. "Of course, I oughtn't to have asked, really," she went on, "because I know what lovely presents you always give."

"Has my fame gone before me?" he said with a smile. "What wedding presents of mine have you ever seen?"

"The quaint one you gave Cedric."

Lord Louis blushed and started. "I am not aware ——" he began, but Sarah interrupted.

"I know all about it," she said. "I wormed the truth from Cedric himself. You needn't look so uncomfortable — I think it was the most original wedding present that ever happened."

"I assure you," exclaimed her future uncle, "you are mistaken. I merely ——"

"Presented him with three bundles of his own letters, tied up in blue ribbon. Were they very expensive, Uncle Louis?"

The nobleman gave a gesture of despair. "Ah, Sarah," he said, "do not judge the boy harshly. I have little doubt after marrying you ——"

Sarah broke out into a happy peal of laughter. "I like him all the better for it," she declared. "One wouldn't think very much of a man who had never attracted any one except one's self. I wouldn't believe a man who said that nothing had ever happened to him before, would you?"

But Lord Louis declined to be drawn out. "We were speaking of your wedding present," he said. "In what direction does your fancy lead you?"

"All right," said Sarah, "we'll talk about the other afterwards. I should like — I should like a god."

"A god?" queried Lord Louis.

"Yes — one of brass and wood. A Buddha. I should love a Buddha. There's something so funny about a Buddha — don't you think?"

"I confess it hadn't struck me," remarked Lord Louis. "In fact, I always regard that image with profound respect."

"That's exactly what I mean," cried Sarah, clapping her hands. "It's just everything that I am not — so sedate! I feel it would be so good for me. A sobering influence. Will you get me one?"

Lord Louis placed his finger-tips together. "My dear little Sarah," he said. "I am not easy in my mind that you are a proper person to take charge of a Buddha. That Eastern deity would, I fear, be sadly out of place in your frivolous household." Sarah's lower lip protruded in a moist pout and Lord Louis, who caught sight of it, immediately relented. "Of course," he said, "if you really want one you shall not be disappointed."

Sarah sprang to her feet and threw her arms about his neck.

"You are as kind as you can possibly be," she cried, and kissed him hard on the end of his nose.

"Sarah — Sarah!" he admonished. "You really must restrain yourself."

"Didn't you like it?" asked the culprit, ingenuously.

"That is hardly the point," he replied, "you must remember that you — er — you — er."

"I will remember when I have my Buddha — and then I shall never do it again."

"I suppose you have set your mind on this present," said Lord Louis with a touch of sadness.

"Of course I have. Will you go up to town and get it from Liberty's tomorrow?"

Lord Louis smiled. "Certainly not," he replied. "If you are determined to have a Buddha you shall have a real one. A Gautama Buddha of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Teak and Thissi lacquer. You may have to wait a long while before I find it, but I promise you, when I do, it shall be the best that money and knowledge can buy."

Among the many and splendid wedding presents showered upon the Hon. Cedric Milwood and his delightful bride no Buddha was visible. Lord Louis had searched, but searched in vain. Indeed six months had passed since the event, when one morning, chancing to read the forthcoming sale column in the *Morning Post*, his eye was attracted by a paragraph stating that the Indian effects of the late Alexander Purvis were to be put up for auction on the following Tuesday, at Murray's, in Jermyn Street.

Not having been to town for some time Lord Louis,

accompanied by Mr. Russell Yorke, booked to Paddington and arrived in the Metropolis on the day before the sale.

After a quiet lunch at the Berkeley they strolled round to Murray's to inspect the collection to be offered on the morrow.

"It is something new for you to take interest in Indian ware," said Mr. Yorke. "I thought you disliked the super-ornamentation they lavish upon their art."

"And so I do," replied Lord Louis. "But I wish to see if there is a Buddha in the collection. Some months ago I promised to buy one for my nephew's wife, and so far have not succeeded."

From the office at the entrance of Murray's they scanned a catalogue and made their way through the spacious galleries where the collection was exhibited.

There was the usual array of oriental arms, saris, howdah covers, illuminated passages from the Koran, Bokara shawls, fine silver and needlework from Kurdistan, but the object of their search was nowhere to be seen.

"I am afraid our journey has been for nothing," said Lord Louis.

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Mr. Yorke, who had the catalogue. "I overlooked this. See. Lot 259. A fine Gautama Buddha, from Pegu, Lower Burmah. Period: Anterior to the seventh century. We never saw that."

"Then let us do so at once," said Lord Louis,

beckoning an attendant and asking to be directed to the exhibit.

"Oh, yes, sir," replied the man. "It's in an anteroom by itself. A fine specimen. I'll show you."

He led the way to a small offshoot of the main gallery.

"There!" he said, lowering his voice, "and with your permission I'll leave you gentlemen to examine it."

Lord Louis and Mr. Yorke found themselves confronted by a wooden figure, about five feet in height, standing on a massive hexagonal base, which lent perhaps another eighteen inches to its stature.

It was an erect figure of teak Thissi-lacquered and overlaid with gold-leaf, much of which had worn off. One hand rested on the breast, while the other, the left, was pointing downwards at the earth with its long seven-inch fingers. Upon the slightly bowed head was a kind of circular cap, surmounted by a pointed finial. The features wore the same indefinable semi-smile, both cruel and understanding, which haunts the lips of Leonardo's Monna Lisa. The body was covered with a conventional robe, hanging from the narrow shoulders and clinging to the figure. Except where the gold-leaf still adhered the colour was of black, water-worn rock.

The base of the image rested on a rough wooden case of the sugar-box variety, on which a framed card was hanging.

Lord Louis seated himself on a little Chesterfield

couch immediately facing it, and, putting on his pincenez, gave himself up to a careful consideration of its virtues.

"Well, what do you think of it?" demanded Mr. Yorke, seating himself at his friend's side.

Lord Louis started. "Were you speaking very loud, then?" he asked in almost a whisper.

"I don't think so," responded Mr. Yorke, heartily.

"Odd!" said Lord Louis, in the same low voice: then, in answer to his friend's question, "It seems to me a very perfect example. It possesses the great silence of the East. Curious! One can't hear the traffic from this room. Do you notice that?"

"We're some way back from the road."

"Yes — of course — of course!" His gaze reverted to the idol. "A fine specimen — very perfect. What is written on that card?"

Mr. Yorke leant forward and took the card from the nail holding it to the side of the box.

"Some description of its antecedents," said he. "Shall I read?"

"Please," begged Lord Louis, and Mr. Yorke read as follows:

"'Gautama Buddha, looted from the Buddhist Temple at Khand, a small village on the outskirts of Pegu, Lower Burmah.

"'The image was taken from the temple by Captain Faber, of the East India Company, during the second Burmese war in 1852. He placed it aboard his ship and set sail for Liverpool.

"'During the voyage uncounted misadventures and

disasters occurred among the ship's company. Three men were washed overboard by heavy seas, an epidemic of smallpox carried off four others, a pulley block fell from one of the mastheads, killing the mate, and, when only two days from their port of landing, a serious outbreak of fire took place. The seamen, who by this time conceived their misfortunes due to the malign influence of the image, mutinied and, placing the captain in his chart house under a guard, raided the hold, brought up the offending idol and hurled it into the sea. Almost immediately the fire abated and was got under control. The captain was released and the vessel made harbour without further mishap.

"'Three weeks later the Buddha was washed up on the shores of Cardigan Bay, and eventually, after many vicissitudes, found its way to the Purvis collection.

"'A clairvoyant who examined it stated its influence was not malign except when it found itself in distasteful surroundings, or among frivolous and sceptical persons.' There!" concluded Mr. Yorke. "What is your opinion of that?"

Lord Louis rose and laid a caressing hand on the figure.

"I shall bid for this," he said. "It appeals to me strongly. There is something so indisputably genuine about it."

"Do you think so?" remarked Mr. Yorke. "Now, personally, I should say that it would be impossible to detect the difference between a real and a

spurious specimen." Lord Louis gave a gesture of irritation and Mr. Yorke proceeded to develop his point of view.

"After all," he said, "the artist who made that achieved nothing which could not perfectly well be reproduced by a Tottenham Court Road cabinet-maker. The work is very rough and indifferent, and the conception absolutely stereotyped."

Lord Louis, who was not accustomed to having his artistic choices criticized even by his friend, replied in rather nettled tones: "My dear Yorke, we all are aware that Indian carving is crude, that is one of its chief features, but there cannot be two opinions upon the point of genuineness. This Thissi-lacquer alone is quite irreproducible."

"I cannot concede even that point," replied Mr. Yorke. "After all, what is Thissi-lacquer? Merely the resinous gum of a certain Oriental tree. I should say that the same effect could be arrived at with some preparation of shellac varnish."

The nobleman made no reply, but his brow contracted and his fingers tightened on the knob of his cane.

"No, I am bound to confess that I believe any competent wood-carver could turn out an object of equal merit in any direction."

The words had scarcely passed his lips when a very unexpected thing took place. Without any warning the box, upon which the image had been standing, crumpled up and the heavy teak figure pitched forward toward the spot where Mr. Yorke was seated.

Without any warning the heavy teak figure pitched forward

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"Look out!" cried Lord Louis, and with a quick movement threw his weight against the left side of the Buddha, thereby diverting the line of its fall. Mr. Yorke ducked his head and sprang away as the heavy object struck the back of the little settee with a heavy thud. The whole proceeding occupied less than a second, and but for Lord Louis' promptness Mr. Yorke would inevitably have taken the full weight of the blow on the top of his head.

For a moment neither spoke, then Mr. Yorke said:

"That was a near thing! Incidentally, I believe you saved my life. Whew! Fancy putting a weighty object like that on such a rotten old box."

"Yes," said Lord Louis, rather queerly. "Undoubtedly the box was to blame."

At this moment the attendant, followed by a middle-aged gentleman, came hurrying to the spot.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the middle-aged individual, "they have smashed the Buddha."

"I beg your pardon," corrected Lord Louis, "'they' have done nothing of the kind. If you will examine the facts you will see that the box supporting the image collapsed. It should never have been placed on anything so insecure. My friend here might have been the victim of a nasty accident."

"Well, so long as the Buddha is uninjured no harm is done," replied the other.

"That's one way of looking at it," said Mr. Yorke. "May I ask what interest you have in this image, sir?"

"I propose to purchase it," was the laconic rejoinder.

"Then," said Lord Louis, "we are one; for I purpose buying it myself."

Mr. Pedrail, for that was the gentleman's name, frowned.

"Let me dissuade you," he urged. "These stolen idols are dangerous things for the uninitiated to handle."

"Conceivably," replied Lord Louis, coldly, "but the description is not apt in my case."

"Their influences," pursued Mr. Pedrail, ignoring the interruption, "are either definitely good or bad. You already have proof this Buddha is malevolently disposed towards you."

Lord Louis smiled cynically. "You must forgive me, my dear sir, if I accuse you of speaking without considered thought. I venture the opinion that any object of equal weight placed on a similarly insecure stand would have fallen in precisely the same way."

"We will not continue the discussion," said Mr. Pedrail. "You have read the story of this Buddha in the frame there, and if that conveys nothing to you of its hidden properties you may consider yourself fortunate that I shall purchase it at tomorrow's sale," and with these parting words he turned on his heel and walked away.

At dinner that evening Lord Louis was very preoccupied. He refused Mr. Yorke's invitation to a stall at the Alhambra, and suggested curtly that he should go alone.

"I thought the entertainment would have appealed to you," said Mr. Yorke with a sly dig. "There is an Indian ballet — and knowing your fondness for the art of that country ——"

But Lord Louis was in no humour for satire, and suppressed any tendency to continue in the same vein by retreating behind the evening paper. Accordingly, Mr. Yorke went alone and left Lord Louis to review the events of the afternoon. Somehow he could not rid his mind of the picture of the Buddha. It at once appealed to and repelled him. Lord Louis was not superstitious, although, like all persons of culture, he was sensitive to the subtle influences which radiate from inanimate objects. It had offended him grievously to be spoken to by a complete stranger, as Mr. Pedrail had spoken. That gentleman, for no reason whatever had suggested that he, Lord Louis Lewis, the eminent collector, was a person of blunt perceptions, because he would not attribute to an evil spiritual agency a perfectly normal misadventure. Then again Mr. Yorke had questioned his word on a point of artistic judgment. This was a most unusual thing for Mr. Yorke to have done. They had been associated together for many years and his decisions had always been accepted as a final court of appeal. He recalled, with a feeling of shame, that it would have given him real pleasure to have rapped his friend's knuckles with his walking-stick when he had presumed to suggest that he, Lord Louis, could easily have been deceived by a Tottenham Court Road craftsman. He had never felt like that before and

failed to understand how such an impulse found its way into his carefully ordered mind. Could the Buddha have anything to do with the curious state of his feelings? He dismissed the thought as absurd; but, nevertheless, wished he had never set eyes on it, for, innocent or guilty, it had been responsible for alienating his affections from his friend, causing him to speak with considerable rudeness to a total stranger, to say nothing of nearly bringing about a most serious accident.

"I have half a mind," he said, speaking to himself, "to have nothing more to do with the thing."

Then came the thought of his promise to Sarah.

"It would be a shame to disappoint her," he mused. "I'll see how I feel about it in the morning," and, touching the bell, he told the man to bring his hat and summon a taxi. Half an hour later he was seated beside Mr. Yorke, in an Alhambra stall, smoking a Laranaga and enjoying the ballet.

The following morning the dark thoughts had vanished from his brain and he and his friend, once more on excellent terms, presented themselves at Murray's at twelve of the clock.

There was a large attendance, and it was some little time before they saw the figure of Mr. Pedrail among the crowd. He caught Lord Louis' eye and came over at once to address him.

"You are still determined to bid for the Buddha?" he demanded.

"I am," replied Lord Louis cheerfully.

Mr. Pedrail opened his mouth to speak, but before

he had framed the words was attacked by a violent fit of coughing.

"You have a cold?" sympathetically inquired the nobleman.

"No, a sudden irritation, that's all," he replied, wiping the moisture from his eyes.

"Ah," said Lord Louis, "that is a complaint to which we are all susceptible," and with a bow he moved away into the crowd.

The auctioneer who conducted the sale was a slow person, and quite early in the proceedings Lord Louis took a dislike to him. He was one of those heavily built men, with several rolls of flesh which rested on his collar. He had a greasy smile, an unpleasant manner, and a disagreeable habit of wearing his waistcoat unbuttoned.

It was nearly three o'clock before the two hundred and fiftieth lot had been reached, and in another ten minutes the ownership of the Buddha would be decided. Lord Louis observed Mr. Pedrail collecting himself for the coming ordeal, and the prospects of the competition aroused in his own being a sensation of excitement. Just at that moment a little man of the middle-class workman type touched Lord Louis on the arm and asked permission to look at his catalogue. Lord Louis handed him the sheet without comment. The little man studied it a few moments, then said:

"I beg your pardon, sir, I see they are putting up a Buddha in a minute or two. Do you happen to know what it's like?"

"A teak figure, about five feet high, from Lower Burmah," he replied.

"Thank you," said the man, and returned the catalogue.

"The next lot," said Mr. Yorke, addressing Lord Louis.

Lord Louis nodded and at the same moment two porters, in green baize aprons, appeared bearing the figure.

"Now, gentlemen," announced the auctioneer, "here we have the real thing. Lot 259. Stand it up on that table, Grey. Don't put your arm round its waist, Goddard. It isn't a young lady, y' know. Come along! Lift it, boys! Can't be as heavy as all that. That's the way!"

The task of raising the figure to the table seemed to cause considerable difficulties to the two porters.

"To me," ordered Grey. "That's it! More — more — now lift."

Goddard exerted all his strength, and the base of the figure rose to the level of the table.

"Now drop it!" shouted Grey, and Goddard did.

"Lumme!" was wrung from Grey. "My blinkin' finger." He stepped clear, shaking his hand and crying aloud in pain.

"You ought to know better than to put your hand under a thing like that. Go and put it under the tap," was the unsympathetic comment from the auctioneer. "Now, gentlemen, take a good look at this."

The little man who had addressed Lord Louis

stepped forward and examined the figure. At first his expression was one of great astonishment. He stretched out a hand and ran it over some of the surfaces. Suddenly his face became purple, and pulling out his handkerchief he thrust it in his mouth and rushed from the building uttering little sobs and cries of the most perplexing kind.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mr. Yorke. "What a singular man."

A little hum of conversation ensued, above which the auctioneer's voice was heard saying, "The figure is attributed as having strange properties, and we couldn't ask for more definite proof than has just been demonstrated. One of our porters gets his finger bitten, and then this gentleman rushes out in a fit. Anybody here who wants to have a nice little family ghost about the place couldn't do better than make a bid. I'll read out what has been written about the thing. Mind you," he added, with a smug grin, "I don't guarantee that the gentleman who does secure it will be haunted, but there is always the chance. I may say that during the three weeks we have been associated together, Buddha and I have been on excellent terms, and, so far as I know, it hasn't once taken it into its head to have a stroll round Piccadilly in the early hours."

A mild flicker of laughter greeted this sally, and he took up the card which had been suspended beneath the figure on the preceding day, and commenced to read:

"'Gautama Buddha. Period: Anterior to the

seventeenth century. Looted from the Buddhist Temple at Khand — a small vil —' " He paused and ran his fingers round the inside of his collar, then passed them over his forehead. " Open a window, some one," he asked. " Seems to have got hot in here. Thanks — thanks! Where were we? Ah, yes! 'a small village on the outskirts of Pegu, Lower Burmah.' Whew! Very close —" and as he continued reading he undid the remaining buttons of his waistcoat. Before opening the bidding he poured out a full glass of water and drained it to the last drop.

" Now, gentlemen," he began, " what offers for Lot 259? "

There was a moment's silence, then from Mr. Pedrail:

" Forty pounds."

Lord Louis caught the auctioneer's eye and raised his gold-mounted cane.

" Fifty," said the auctioneer.

Mr. Pedrail jumped to seventy-five; which price Lord Louis bettered by a bid of one hundred.

" Aren't you forcing the price too fast? " queried Mr. Yorke. " It can't be worth more than that."

Lord Louis did not reply, his attention being fixed on the auctioneer, who, with closed eyes, was shaking violently and swaying to and fro in his little pulpit.

" Don't know what's the matter with me," he was saying. " Doesn't seem to be any air in the place."

Some one moved to the entrance and wedged open the double swing doors, letting a current of fresh,

clean air into the building. The auctioneer snuffed it in gratefully.

"That's better. Hundred bid. 'Gainst you, sir."

"A hundred and twenty-five," rapped out Mr. Pedrail.

"One hundred and fifty," said Lord Louis, and was rewarded by a glare from his opponent. "Our friend is again suffering from temporary irritation," he murmured to Mr. Yorke.

"Any advance on a hundred and fifty?" came from the auctioneer in a level, mechanical voice.

Mr. Pedrail squared his shoulders —"I bid ——" he began — then stopped abruptly, caught in his breath and coughed.

"I didn't catch that bid, sir," from the auctioneer.

But Mr. Pedrail made no reply. He stood a moment with his mouth tightly closed, then gave vent to a veritable paroxysm of coughing and choking.

"Come along, sir," exclaimed the auctioneer, speaking as one suffering from a great strain. "We can't wait all night. A hundred and fifty offered." Pedrail clasped his sides, and coughed the louder. "Going for — hun'ed and fif —" He gripped the front of his desk and raised his hammer. "For the las' time at hun'ed and fift'— Going — going — Gone!" The hammer fell with a thud on the desk, slipped from his fingers and dropped to the floor. The auctioneer raised an unsteady hand and pointed at Lord Louis. "That gent'man — there!" Then, with a sudden rise in his voice and staring full at the

Buddha which confronted him, he cried out: "Don't look at me like that, you black brute. D' y' hear!" He stopped, clutched at his throat and collapsed, an inert heap at the bottom of his box.

There was a stir in the crowd, several people pressing forward with offers of help, and the unconscious figure was carried away to the manager's office.

"Fainted," said Mr. Yorke, sympathetically. "I don't wonder, this atmosphere is very trying." Lord Louis nodded, and stepping up to the desk handed in his cheque and gave instructions for the purchase to be sent to his Bristol house.

When they reached the pavement ten minutes later Mr. Yorke observed: "It was unfortunate for our friend to have been attacked with coughing at that particular moment. I am sure he intended to bid higher."

Lord Louis halted, and considered for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "I am not satisfied that we behaved fairly. I shall go and speak to him."

The words had scarcely passed his lips when the gentleman referred to appeared at the top of the steps. Lord Louis at once approached him and said:

"I am afraid, sir, you may accuse me of having taken advantage of your indisposition to secure the Buddha. Rather than allow you to ——"

But Mr. Pedrail interrupted. "Set your mind at rest," he replied, "you are more than welcome to the prize. It is evident I was not *intended* to secure it," and there was an odd note in his voice as he said the words.

"But if you really desire to have it —" began Lord Louis.

"There is nothing in the world I desire less," he answered.

"In that case," said Lord Louis, "there is no more to be said. Good afternoon. I am just returning to inquire after our friend the auctioneer."

"You can save yourself the trouble, I have already done so."

"And how is he progressing?" asked the nobleman.

"He is dead," replied Mr. Pedrail. "Good day!" and raising his hat he walked swiftly away, leaving Lord Louis with a curious sensation of chilliness stealing up his spine.

. . . . . .

It was two days later and the Buddha, newly arrived from London, was standing in a corner of Lord Louis' smoking-room.

"But why?" said Mr. Yorke. "I understood you bought it as a present for Mrs. Milwood."

"I did. But I have changed my mind," replied Lord Louis.

"Any particular reason?"

"It is an unsuitable present, Yorke," catching his friend's eye. "Do you believe in inanimate objects having spiritual properties?"

"Not unless they come out of a bottle," returned the gentleman appealed to. Then seeing that his sally had offended, he continued, "You are worrying over the curious chain of events which took place

before and during the sale?" Lord Louis nodded. "I shouldn't. After all they are easily explained. A rotten box — a chronic cough — and a sufferer from fatty degeneration of the heart."

"Yes, all that is very true — still ——" replied Lord Louis, but the sentence was never completed, for the door flew open and little Mrs. Sarah Milwood unexpectedly came into the room.

"I thought I'd pay you a surprise visit," she exclaimed, offering her rosy cheek to her uncle and giving her left hand to Mr. Yorke. "I drove over to see my dressmaker, and you must give me some tea. Do say you are pleased to see me!"

"Of course — of course," replied Lord Louis. "Sit down here," offering her a chair which would have screened the Buddha from her view. "You must be tired."

"I am never tired when I come to see you," she rattled on, then exclaimed, "Oh! You have got it!"

"What?" said Lord Louis, innocently.

"My Buddha. What a beauty!"

"Ah," said Lord Louis, hastily. "Yes, that is the Buddha, but I don't think I shall give it to you, after all. You see — you see — er — well, I doubt if I ought to part with it. No."

"Well!" said Sarah, shaking her head gravely, "if any one had told me you would do a thing like that I should never have believed them. You like it so much you won't give it away."

"No such matter," protested the nobleman, hotly.

"I have a very different reason for my decision. Two days ago, when I bought it at Murray's, I expressly intended it for you, and I have only changed my mind because ——"

Sarah broke in excitedly. "It's not the one which was sold at the Indian sale the day before yesterday, when the auctioneer died and the other gentleman couldn't go on bidding?"

"The same," said Mr. Yorke. "But how did you know?"

"There's an article in this morning's *Chronicle*. Oh, how exciting! I simply must have it."

"I would very much prefer you shouldn't," pleaded her uncle. "I have no superstitions, but undoubtedly this image has a sinister record."

"That is because the poor thing has never found a happy home," said Sarah. "I am sure when it comes to me it will be the happiest little Buddha in the land. I shall make up to it for all its troubles in the past."

"My dear Sarah," replied Lord Louis, "the daughters of Mara made up to Buddha to their own undoing. Let that be a lesson for you."

"Who was Mara?" demanded Sarah. "Was he an Irishman?"

"He was a devil," replied Lord Louis.

"Well, anyhow," declared Sarah, "I am going to take my Buddha away with me. I may — mayn't I?" and she looked at him wistfully, like a dog begging.

Lord Louis tried to be unconscious of the look, but

there was no escaping it. His determination to refuse melted before those appealing eyes.

"Very well, Sarah," he said; "but understand I take no responsibility whatever."

Sarah clapped her hands and pranced from the room.

"Where are you going?" cried Lord Louis.

"You'll see!" she replied, and disappeared from view.

Two minutes later she returned followed by her chauffeur and Lord Louis' valet.

"That's it," she said, pointing at the figure. "Pick it up and put it in the Limousine. Carefully!"

Under her generalship the heavy figure was brought forth and placed in the waiting automobile. This done, Sarah jumped in beside it and drew the rug over her knees.

"Where are you off to?" demanded Lord Louis, who had followed the procession to the door.

"Home," she responded, answering him and giving the order to the chauffeur with the same word.

"But aren't you going to have some tea?"

"Nope! I am going to take my little Buddha away before you change your mind." And with a wave of the hand she was gone.

. . . . . .

Now this happened on Wednesday, and on the following Friday afternoon, at about five-thirty, Lord Louis received a telegram, which ran —

"Come at once. You n ust. Sarah."

Without a moment's hesitation he ordered the car and ten minutes later was traversing the twenty odd miles which separated his abode from the estate of his nephew. He had instructed his man to set at defiance all the speed regulations, and nobly his commands had been observed. The distance was covered in something less than three-quarters of an hour.

Lord Louis demanded that the news of his arrival should be conveyed at once to Mrs. Milwood. He was shown into her cushiony boudoir and invited to wait. For the first few moments he paced up and down anxiously, subconsciously fearing the malevolent influences of the Buddha were already at work. Then he sat on the edge of a divan and rapped his foot nervously on the thick pile of the black carpet. Ten minutes passed and still no Sarah. A horrible doubt oppressed him that some ill had befallen her. He rose and touched the bell and a man servant replied to the summons.

"Did you tell your mistress I was here?" he asked.

"I gave the message to her maid, my lord.

"Her maid? Is Mrs. Milwood ill, then."

"No, my lord — dressing."

"Ah," said Lord Louis. "Thank you — thanks."

The man had no sooner withdrawn than Sarah, divinely dressed in the most diaphanous of confections, came into the room. She crossed, impulsively, to Lord Louis with outstretched hands and a face wreathed in dimpling smiles.

"You got my wire all right? How sweet of you to have come," she said.

Lord Louis pressed her hands. "I started immediately on receiving it," he said. "Tell me, my dear Sarah, what has happaned?"

"Happened," repeated Sarah, with a puzzled look. "I don't understand."

"But from your wire I feared you were in trouble."

"Oh, no! I only wanted you to come over and spend the evening."

Lord Louis passed a hand over his brow. "I ought to be cross with you, Sarah," he declared with an effort to look severe. "I am sure Cedric would never have allowed you to telegraph such a startling appeal."

"Cedric is away, at his mother's place. That's why I sent for you."

"You sent for me," repeated Lord Louis, hazily.

"Yes, because I was lonely. Aren't you glad?"

"And was this Cedric's idea?"

"No, he doesn't know anything about it. I just thought it would be nice."

Lord Louis rose. "My dear Sarah," he exclaimed. "I shall have to speak to you very seriously. You must realize that such an invitation in your husband's absence is most unconventional."

Sarah looked contrite. "Is it?" she said. "I thought it would be all right with an uncle."

"Well, acceding that point," he continued, "you are surely aware that to receive such a message as you sent is, to say the least, disquieting."

"Did you think something awful had happened to me?"

"I was apprehensive."

"Uncle Louis! I believe you thought the old Buddha had got going again. Did you, did you?"

But Lord Louis merely shrugged his shoulders, and Sarah continued:

"Well, you were quite right. It has!"

"What?" he exclaimed.

"All sorts of dreadful things have happened since it came. Cedric's mother has been taken ill — two of the maids have given notice — 'Smoke,' my beautiful blue Persian cat, has been behaving in the oddest way — the stained-glass window on the stairs was smashed when they were bringing it up, and all four tyres of my motor burst soon after I left you on Wednesday. There! what do you think of that?" and she broke into a merry peal of laughter.

But there was no echoing laugh from Lord Louis.

"Sarah, Sarah," he said. "These are not matters to treat lightly. Please allow me to take this Buddha away with me now."

"Shouldn't dream of it," she responded. "Besides you are stopping to dinner, and spending the evening afterwards."

Lord Louis was about to refuse both propositions when the door opened and the butler announced that dinner was served. Realizing the fates were against his virtuous resolves he offered his arm to his charming niece and conducted her to the dining-room.

It was a very well-chosen little meal which Sarah

had prepared, and he was bound to confess that his unspoken intention of departing at its conclusion caused him to bestow more time to the dessert than was his usual habit.

The subject of the Buddha had not been reverted to, and Sarah's conversation, which consisted of a frank exposition of her pre-marital love affairs, was at once amusing and original. Lord Louis was on the point of pouring out a second glass of port when a footman entered, with a scared expression on his face, and asked permission to speak.

"Yes, what is it?" demanded Sarah.

"The chamber-maid has just come down from upstairs and she says something dreadful is goin' on up there. Your Persian cat, madam, gone mad, she says. She was dashing herself against that — that Indian figure you brought. Tearing at it with her claws." Lord Louis and Sarah rose simultaneously.

"Smoke has been behaving queerly all day," said Sarah, with a little tremor in her voice. "Where is she now, Lindsay?"

"Still there, madam, I believe."

"You believe? Didn't you go and fetch her?"

"We — we none of us liked to, madam."

"Why not?"

"Louisa said — it looked as if the figure was moving. She thought she saw it move."

But Sarah listened to no more and, followed by Lord Louis, ran from the room and up the wide staircase.

"It's at the end of the long corridor," she cried,

then called "Smoke! Smokey!" but there was no answering "miaow."

Sarah halted at the beginning of the long corridor, which brought Lord Louis abreast of her. The place, with the exception of a faint light which came up the well of the staircase from the hall below, was in absolute darkness.

"There's a switch by the door," pointed Sarah.

Lord Louis pressed it down, but nothing happened.

"There is something the matter with it," he said.

Sarah moved to the banisters, and called "Lindsay! the fuse has gone up here. Put in a new one at once."

"Yes, madam," came the answer from below.

"Come on," said Sarah. "We won't wait. There's a candle on the table half-way down the passage."

Together they groped forward in the dark.

"Creak! Creak!" came from the complaining floor-boards, for they were in that part of the house whose antiquity was beyond recollection.

"Here we are," announced Sarah. "Can you find it?"

Lord Louis was fumbling over the surface of the table, when from a short distance away a thin, hair-raising wail assailed their ears. It grew in volume to break off sharp in a hard coughing gasp.

"What's that?" Sarah clutched Lord Louis' arm and, straining their eyes into the blackness, they automatically moved towards the sound.

They were now not more than a few feet from the

spot where the Buddha had been placed, immediately beside which was a little window. The night, however, was so dark that no light percolated through its diamonded panes; but, as the two moved forward, a cloud must have passed from the face of the moon, for a shaft of silver iridescence broke through, revealing the ebony figure of the idol in harsh contrasts of black and white. But that was not all — the long, tapering forefinger of the left hand pointed downwards to where, lying on its back, with all four feet thrust starkly upwards, was the dead body of Smoke, the blue Persian.

Neither Sarah nor Lord Louis uttered a sound, but they drew closer together watching, wide-eyed, the horrible tableau before them. And as they looked the grim figure jerked first to one side, then to the other. There was a straining creak — a tearing sound, and the body of the cat was flung up against the breast of the idol. Something struck Lord Louis' outstretched hand a sharp blow — then Buddha, cat, and everything, lit up for a fraction of time by a yellow glow, utterly disappeared from view. There was a splitting crash — and all was silent.

The next thing Lord Louis knew was that Sarah's white arms were round his neck, and her breath was coming against his cheeks in short gasps.

"Hold me — hold me! I'm terrified," she was crying — and before he knew what he was doing he had clasped her frail body tightly to his, and was covering her quivering face with kisses. In between the kisses he heard himself saying, in a voice he could

hardly recognize as his own, "There — there, it's all right, my dear! I won't leave you, Sarah! Oh, my dear, darling little Sarah!"

The lights went up and the whole corridor was filled with a bright radiance.

A few feet away, where the Buddha had been standing, was a black, gaping hole. Lord Louis saw the hole, and with it came enlightment. Sarah saw it, too, and extricated herself from his embrace.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "The floor gave way — that explains everything."

But Lord Louis' face was scarlet. "It does not explain — everything," he stammered. "That figure was possessed of an evil genius — a devil from the East. I know it was — I am certain. Otherwise — otherwise —" But the sentence was never completed, for the butler, followed by Lindsay, came hurrying down the passage.

"Are you all right, madam?" inquired the butler. Sarah nodded. "It came through my pantry ceiling and broke to bits," he continued. "I meant to tell you when we put the figure there that it wasn't safe. The floor-boards had shrunk away from the skirting." He stepped forward to examine the hole. "You see, my lord, the weight of the figure levered up the boards and drew the nails at the other end, then pushed through the old lath and plaster of the pantry ceiling."

Lord Louis recalled the blow he had felt on his hand.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Of course! I realized at

once what had happened." But he cleared his throat rather nervously as he said it.

"And poor Smoke?" demanded Sarah.

"She came through as well, madam. I'm afraid she's dead."

Lord Louis clutched at the straw, and looked at Sarah.

"A sacrifice to Buddha," he said.

"I have been expecting her to die these last few days," said the butler, tactlessly. "She's been ailing some time."

"Yes," said Sarah. "There is a natural explanation for everything," and she looked at Lord Louis.

Lord Louis swallowed audibly. "I will go and see the extent of the damage," he muttered, and waving aside the proffered escort of the servant he walked hurriedly away towards the butler's pantry.

Over and over in his brain ran the thought that the Buddha was to blame for everything — everything.

On the floor of the pantry lay the fallen idol.

It had broken away from its heavy hexagonal base and, as he closed the door behind him, he noticed the head was fractured in three places. He stooped and picked up one of the pieces and carried it to the light. To his amazement, it was not of wood. It was hollow, and the material resembled common *papier maché.*

Lord Louis looked round nervously to be sure that he was alone. Then he drew his penknife from his pocket and scratched up a flake of the substance from the inside of the cranium. The adhesiveness of the

paste had long since perished and a long strip of papery substance came off in his hand. He reversed it, rubbed away some of the caked paste and revealed in block-type printing the words, "Mathew Porter, 90 St——e St., To—t——am C——rt Roa—."

The horrible truth dawned on him in a flash. The figure was not Indian at all. He, Lord Louis Lewis, the eminent connoisseur, had been deceived by a trumpery fraud. He crushed the tell-tale paper into the outer pocket of his coat. He, Lord Louis, had been cheated, by a chain of easily explained events, to attributing supernatural powers to a false god. A hot flush of shame suffused his features when he recalled how far he had allowed himself to believe the Buddha was to blame. One thing was clear — the truth must be kept from Sarah at all costs. Snatching up a tablecloth he wrapped up the broken pieces of the head; then went to the door and called. His own chauffeur, who was in the kitchen, answered him.

"Come along," said Lord Louis, picking up the heavy base, "help me to get these pieces to the car."

On their last journey they met Sarah.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I am taking it away with me now," he answered. "Start up the car, Wilton, I shall be with you in a moment," and he took his overcoat from the stand.

There was a little twinkle in Sarah's eyes as she said:

"Are you going, Uncle Louis?"

"At once," he replied. Then, "Sarah. You will naturally tell Cedric of tonight's events?" She

nodded. "If I might suggest, I think it would be unwise to alarm him unnecessarily. You and I know that some unexplainable spiritual forces were at work, but, on the other hand, as you so faithfully remarked, everything that occurred can be traced to perfectly natural causes."

"I think so," said Sarah. "Everything! Good-night."

And Lord Louis shook hands with his niece in his most formal manner.

There was a letter awaiting him on his return, which ran as follows: —

Dear Sir,—

Knowing you are interested in reproductions of the antique may I solicit a visit from you to inspect my stock at any time you should find yourself in the neighbourhood of Tottenham Court Road.

Yours faithfully,

MATHEW PORTER.

90, Store Street, W. C.

The next morning Lord Louis sent a wire to Mathew Porter offering him ten pounds and expenses to call at his abode during the course of the day.

At about eleven o'clock Mr. Yorke looked in, and to his lasting credit be it said that he expressed nothing but indignation at learning that his conjecture had proved correct. Neither then, nor afterwards, did he display the slightest tendency to gloat over his more accurate judgment.

Mr. Porter arrived during the afternoon, and proved to be none other than the gentleman who had rushed from the building at the moment the Buddha was exhibited for sale.

"I couldn't help laughing when I saw it," he said. "What? Oh, I carved it about ten years ago. Not a bad copy. Did it from memory and a sketch I made when I was stopping at a South Coast hotel. They told me the history of it, and that gave me the idea. So I made the figure and borrowed the history. Mr. Purvis wanted a Buddha and, as he was took in by it, I let him have it as being genuine."

Lord Louis controlled himself as best he could. "One thing puzzles me," he said. "How did you procure the Thissi-lacquer with which the figure was covered. I believed that to be irreproducible."

Mr. Porter smiled. "It was only Jackson's stain rubbed down," he replied. "You couldn't never tell the difference."

Lord Louis silently handed him the cheque and opened him the door.

"Thank you, Mr. Porter," he said. "Good day!"

"Much obliged," said that gentleman.

"One moment," said Lord Louis. "Where is the real Buddha that you copied this from?"

Mr. Porter shook his head. "I wouldn't give away the name," he said. "But there was no doubt about that one being a tartar. I heard they was going to send it to the Victoria and Albert. It gave their place a bad name, you see. Old customers

wouldn't go back. Women saw it walk at night and so forth."

"Thank you," remarked Lord Louis, and bowed him out.

There are two things which will always be a mystery to Lord Louis Lewis. The first, how he came to have been taken in by an imitation, and, the second, whether it would be possible for a spirit from the East to possess a body from the Tottenham Court Road, and to possess it with such potency that a gentleman of absolute moral integrity could so far be disordered as to embrace his nephew's wife in a dark corridor, and call her "darling"—not once, but several times.

NOTE: At the Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, about two-thirds of the way down the long main gallery, there stand two Gautama Buddhas. The one on the left has a sinister history, a history which much resembles the one printed on the card which Mr. Yorke read to Lord Louis. This figure is the one from which, before its accession to the museum, Mathew Porter made his copy.

If you are fortunate it is possible you may get into conversation with the erudite gentleman who is in charge of that section, and he will be able to give you the whole strange story, with a wealth of detail which the author's poor pen cannot attempt to emulate.

CHAPTER VII

SEVEN KHANG-HE VASES

LORD LOUIS LEWIS had stepped into Sylvester's drug store to make a few purchases for his toilet, and, finding the assistant who usually attended to his wants engaged with another customer, he sat down to wait.

Without any desire to overhear what was being said he was conscious of the ensuing conversation.

The customer, a dapper individual of early middle age, clean-shaven, and quick alike in movement and speech, was saying:

"Always have been a bad sailor, that is why I want the stuff. Something which will put me to sleep for fully twelve hours and won't have too bad an effect afterwards. I want to go off before I start and wake up in port. That St. George's Channel crossing is more than I can do with."

Lord Louis mentally wondered by what route the gentleman was going to Ireland that would keep him twelve hours at sea. He heard the assistant put his thought into words.

"No, no. I'm going over in a little cargo boat," came the reply after a pause which instinctively made Lord Louis suspect the man was lying, and was in reality a victim of the drug habit. Clearly the assist-

ant thought the same, for he tentatively suggested some mild remedies for *mal-de-mer*, which the other promptly waved aside.

"I know all about your bromides, they are no good to me. I don't want to be conscious even that the boat is moving. How about veronal, now?"

The assistant admitted that veronal would have the desired result, but at the same time deprecated its use.

"I shan't use it more than the once, and I don't suppose that'll harm me much. How many tablets shall I have to take — twelve hours, mind?"

The chemist gave the required information, which the other carefully noted on the back of an envelope. This done, he threw a piece of silver on the counter and pocketed the neatly wrapped-up and pink-stringed little parcel.

As he was leaving the chemist remarked, "Are you crossing to-night, sir?" He received a nod by way of answer and continued —"With lovely weather like this you'd hardly want to take anything."

"It isn't the weather," came the reply, "it's the infernal jogging about that finds a man. G' morning!" and he was gone.

While Lord Louis was making his purchases he remarked:

"A follower of De Quincey, do you think?"

"I don't know what to make of him," replied the assistant; "he didn't look like a drug fiend to me. But there was something funny about him all the same."

"A regular customer?" inquired Lord Louis by way of making conversation.

"No, I have never served him before. If your lordship is at all interested in soap I can recommend a new consignment we have received from Paris."

As a person who disclaims interest in soap is apt to be misunderstood, Lord Louis added a box from the new consignment to his original list of requirements.

On leaving the shop he directed his footsteps towards the police-station, and asked that his card might be given to Inspector Wardle. He was informed that Inspector Wardle was out, but that Sub-Inspector Harris would be pleased to see him. Accordingly, he was shown into that gentleman's office to await his pleasure.

The sub-inspector was a person whose duties oppressed him with a sense of considerable personal importance. He did not rise on the entry of his distinguished visitor, but continued to transcribe details of a lost Pekinese into a large register before him. This official attitude tended rather to amuse than to annoy Lord Louis, who seated himself upon the narrow bench, and waited to be addressed.

Presently the pen was laid aside, the entry blotted, and the eyes of the inspector raised to the level of his own.

"Now then," said Harris, "what can I do for you?"

"If the past week is any criterion," replied Lord Louis, lightly, "I am disposed to think that neither

you nor your confrères are able to do very much. More as a matter of form than in a spirit of hope I am paying my usual morning call to inquire whether you have ascertained anything further about the set of Khang-he vases stolen from my house last Thursday night."

Harris took Lord Louis' card and examined it minutely — then said:

"And are you Lord Louis Lewis?" The nobleman inclined his head. "I am not on the case myself," pursued Harris, "but I heard about it. Set of seven China vases taken, wasn't it?"

"More or less," commented Lord Louis. "To be strictly accurate it was a set of blue and white vases of the Khang-he period, but the burglars only succeeded in getting away with five of the number. You will remember that the remaining two, in company with several pieces of silver, had been packed for flight, but were abandoned."

The sub-inspector nodded gravely. "You know my idea is," he said, "that they got a scare and made off with what they could carry."

"I have little doubt but that your theory is correct," remarked Lord Louis, with a whimsical smile. "Please tell me whether you have any clue which may lead to the recovery of my property."

But the sub-inspector did not believe in giving a direct answer.

"China is funny stuff to trace," he said weightily. "Very funny! Not like gold or silver. With gold

or silver you know where you are, but with china you don't."

"My dear sir," said Lord Louis, "china must be far the easiest, there being no danger of its finding its way to the melting-pot."

"Then again," continued the officer, "there is no small wonder your house was broken into. You had no alarm or shutters — any one could have broken in — I could have broken in myself. I reckon you ought to count yourself lucky they only got the vases. You'd have been much worse off if they'd taken the silver. That's the way I look at it."

"I cannot share your point of view," remarked Lord Louis dryly. "The loss of the silver would have been a small affair by comparison. This set of Khang-he vases was valued collectively at eight thousand pounds."

"I'd be very sorry to pay eight thousand pence for any vases," said Harris. "After all, what are they? A few bits of china, when all's said and done — that's the way I look at it."

Lord Louis rose to his feet. "Conceivably that attitude may in some measure account for the scant success which has rewarded your investigations. I wish you good morning," and he walked from the office.

Ten minutes later he entered the Conservative Club and drew up a chair beside his friend Mr. Yorke.

"Any news?" said the latter gentleman.

"None," replied Lord Louis. "The police have

proved themselves worse than useless. The affair is very provoking. I valued that set amongst my chief possessions. I do not suppose there was another in existence where so perfect a uniformity of paste and colour had been achieved."

Mr. Yorke sighed. "I always coveted it," he remarked. "One can understand the thieves would take almost any risk to obtain such a prize. What a pity a trusting disposition led you to leave your house so unprotected."

"You will not be able to bring that accusation against me in the future," the nobleman responded. "I have had shutters fixed to all the downstairs windows, and the most elaborate system of burglar alarms fitted throughout. No one could enter or leave the house now without setting in motion a warning bell."

Mr. Yorke smiled. "Isn't that a case of locking the stable door after the horse has flown?"

"There are other horses in the stable," replied Lord Louis. "Besides, you forget the two remaining vases from the same set."

"I should imagine they are comparatively safe," hazarded Mr. Yorke.

"One cannot be sure," answered Lord Louis.

About noon the next day when Lord Louis was taking his accustomed morning stroll he noticed two men at the corner of the road in which he resided. Something struck him as familiar in the attitude of one of them, and on approaching he recognized the customer who had bought the veronal at the chemist's

store. Mentally congratulating himself on the accuracy of his surmise that he had not purchased the drug to allay the throes of sea-sickness, he was on the point of passing when he observed the man nudge his friend, and at the same time make some curious movement with his fingers.

Lord Louis stopped at once and addressed him. "Your pardon," said he. "Am I right in believing that you directed at me a gesture of derision?"

The man started perceptibly, but did not reply; accordingly Lord Louis put the question again.

"Oh, no, sir," he replied. "I said something to my friend, that's all. He's dumb — deaf and dumb — and I was talking to him in the deaf and dumb language."

Lord Louis hastened to apologize for his mistake, and with a bow to the afflicted individual continued on his way, wondering at the impulse which had caused him to address a total stranger on so slender a pretext.

He dined out that evening, and as Mr. Yorke had been a guest at the same house and their homeward ways lay in the same direction Lord Louis invited him to come in and take a whisky and soda before retiring.

In the large square hall he noticed an unfamiliar object — a fine brass-bound chest, about four feet in height by six in length. The lower half comprised two deep drawers and the upper a long box accessible from the lid. It was of the Queen Anne period, and heavily ornamented in lacquered brass.

"A fine chest," said Mr. Yorke, coming to Lord Louis' side.

"Is it not?" replied Lord Louis. "Very fine indeed."

"A recent purchase?" inquired Mr. Yorke.

Lord Louis shook his head. "I have never seen it before," he replied. "No doubt some dealer sent it on approbation. I have an arrangement with two or three who forward pieces likely to suit my requirements."

At this moment Lord Louis' butler entered the hall and came forward with a word of explanation.

"It arrived, m' lord, about half-past nine in a railway delivery van. I hesitated about taking it in as the name on the label was quite illegible, and your lordship had not mentioned he was expecting anything."

"Probably Dillon sent it from Bath," said Lord Louis. "Where is the label, Badger?"

"On the back, m' lord."

Lord Louis grasped a brass handle on the side and pulled the chest, with some difficulty, from the wall.

"It is heavy enough," he remarked, stooping to examine the label. "Hum! the name is undecipherabe. I wonder they even made out the address. Perhaps it has been delivered here by mistake." And placing his shoulder against the chest he pushed it back to its former position.

"The carter told me he had fetched it from the cloak-room," said Badger. "I thought there might

be a letter in one of the drawers, but they are locked, and the top as well."

"It looks extremely handsome in its present position," observed Lord Louis. "Some whisky and soda in the smoking-room, Badger."

Some time later, when Mr. Yorke was putting on his overcoat preparatory to leaving, seven of Lord Louis' clocks simultaneously proclaimed the hour of midnight.

"I cannot think," said Mr. Yorke, "how you contrive to synchronise the chiming of your clocks so perfectly."

Lord Louis smiled and held up a fore-finger. As he did so from the direction of the drawing-room came another chime.

"All save that one," he said. "It is the Louis Seize, and try as I will I cannot regulate it to strike with the others. If it were not for the fact that it actually belonged to my namesake sovereign and came from the Tuileries I should be sorely tempted to get rid of it. Good night," and with a smiling farewell he closed the front-door behind his friend.

Before retiring Lord Louis wandered round the various rooms where the newly fitted burglar alarms had been placed. Having satisfied himself that all was in order he extinguished the lights and went upstairs.

As a general rule Lord Louis Lewis was a man to whom sleep came easily; but on this particular night the goddess passed his bedside and left him wakeful

and restless. Vainly he resorted to various accepted methods of wooing somnolence. Black sheep and white, beyond number, passed in a never-ending stream over his fancy-fraught stile. He repeated the multiplication table for thirteen times thirteen over and over again. He recited long passages from Milton's "Paradise Lost," but all without avail. The easily explained noises and little sounds of a house, which by day seem natural and good, began to assume strange villainies. The creaking of doors was detestable — the dripping water in the cistern was ominous. The hours, quarters, and halves were beaten out with melancholy exactitude, and in varying keys, by the different clocks — their unanimous message of time ever closely followed by the tardy note of Louis Seize in the drawing-room.

"T—t—t—ting," they went — a pause — then the single voice "Ting!"

"Confound that clock!" said Lord Louis when, at a quarter to two, it had expressed its opinion on the accuracy of the other seven. "I'll have the chime removed tomorrow."

From that point onwards the late stroke of the Louis Seize became the besetting thought in his brain. He determined when two o'clock should strike he would put his fingers in his ears and so shut out its argumentative statement. He would wait until the old William and Mary grandfather, in the dining-room, which had a longer peal and started the chorus, had struck, and would then duck his head beneath the bedclothes and smother the other sound.

The door of the dining-room was closed, so he would have to listen attentively or he might well miss the notes of the William and Mary, which carried but softly to his sleeping chamber. His thoughts began to wander as to the many and strange sights the old clock had seen. Litttle children had grown into manhood, or beautiful womanhood, before its yellow dial; it had "tick-tacked" the gold of their hair into strands of thinning silver. Likely enough, it had witnessed pretty rapier play, quick thrust and clever parry; had been a listener at conspiracies and a confidant of secret love affairs. A week since it had stood by, unresisting, while thieves had carried off five of his beautiful set of Khang-he vases.

This reflection brought his mind abruptly to the present. What a pity the clock could not supply the information the dull-headed local police had failed to secure.

"Ding-dong, ding-dong—ding-dong—ding-dong."

Lord Louis started. How very near it sounded. Much nearer than at the last chime. Yet he knew the dining-room door to be shut. He had shut it himself.

He had forgotten to close his ears, and only thought of it when too late to escape the Louis Seize's "Ting!"

Whereupon he pulled the bed-clothes over his head, and was much annoyed. He lay like that for several minutes, in a state of childish irritability, before it occurred to him to wonder why the William and Mary had sounded so close. Having arrived at no satis-

factory conclusion he sat up in bed to listen for the quarter-past to chime. After what seemed ages it came — but this time the old muffled, distant note again. Lord Louis was so perplexed that he made no attempt to escape from the sound of the Louis Seize. Suddenly he became aware that it had not struck. There could be no doubt about that, his sensitive ear could hardly have failed to catch its insistent note. It must have stopped — but that was impossible; he wound it up, in company with the others, only the day before yesterday. Then, why? Why also had the William and Mary, which a quarter of an hour before had sounded so close, seemed so far away at the last chime.

There appearing no solution to either of these queries Lord Louis rose, put on his dressing-gown and slippers, and descended the stairs.

He switched on the hall light. Everything was as he left it a couple of hours earlier. The dining-room door was closed. He had thought to find that it had not been properly latched and had possibly been swinging to and fro, thus explaining how the sound had varied from soft to loud and back again. But this was not the case. Lord Louis rubbed his nose in perplexity, and turned his attention to the drawing-room to ascertain what was amiss with the Louis Seize. He pressed the electric switch on entering, and turned his gaze towards the mantelpiece where the clock was standing. But the clock was standing there no longer. It had vanished, and, save for a pair of Sèvres candlesticks of no particular value, the

mantelpiece was denuded. The beautiful onyx head of Mercury with his winged cap of chrysolite, the little bronze mask of Medusa, which stood upon a pedestal of lapis lazuli, had both disappeared. His eyes travelled swiftly to the Sheraton cabinet, in which were assembled some of the most beautiful pieces of eggshell china in existence. To his horror it was empty. He had been robbed.

Lord Louis' mind worked quickly, and he realized that the things must have been taken within the last twenty minutes. The Louis Seize had chimed at two o'clock, but at a quarter-past had been silent. Then he remembered something else. At two o'clock the William and Mary had sounded very loud. The burglar must have been in the dining-room at that time — with the door open. He quickly re-crossed the hall and laid his hand on the knob of the dining-room door. Then he halted. The thought came into his head that the burglar might still be there. He had not looked in when he tried the latch a moment before. He was quite unarmed, and it was obvious that whoever had stolen the goods must still be in the house, for had any one left by door or window the burglar alarm would have proclaimed the fact.

Lord Louis drew a deep breath and stepped inside. There was not a sound. He switched up the light. Everything was apparently in order in that part of the room facing the door. He turned to examine the sideboard, and as he did so he gave vent to a sharp exclamation. Of all the exquisite array of old Geor-

gean silver which was wont to ornament its polished surface not a single piece remained — but there was worse to come, for the two remaining vases of the famous Khang-he set, which were always located on the Delft rack above the sideboard, had vanished too.

Lord Louis brought his fist down on the dining-room table with a resounding blow which mercifully covered an expression of extreme violence. He strode over to the writing-table and opening a drawer took therefrom a small Browning pistol and an electric torch, armed with which he strode forth to do battle against the invader.

As he moved towards the door he heard a creak on the stairs. Some one was approaching. Without a second's hesitation he sprang into the hall, crying "Hands up!"

Lord Louis' butler, for it was he who was descending, nearly dropped the candle he carried in his surprise.

"Oh! It's you, m' lord," he gasped, recovering his dignity. "I thought I heard burglars. There was a sound of a blow a minute ago."

"I did that," said Lord Louis, grimly. "Come in here and see why."

Badger was thunderstruck. "They must be here still, m'lord," he cried. "If they'd tried to get out we should have heard the alarm."

"Precisely," said Lord Louis, picking up a heavy antique mace and handing it to his butler, "and that being so we will begin to look for them at once."

Within the next half-hour they searched every

Without a second's hesitation he sprang into the hall, crying "Hands up!"

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possible hiding place in the house, but without revealing a trace of the marauders. Not content with this they covered the whole area a second time and, finally finishing up in the hall, confessed themselves to be utterly bewildered.

"It beats me, my lord, how they managed it," said Badger. "Hadn't I better ring up the police and let them have a try?"

"Certainly not," replied Lord Louis, "if we, with our sharper intelligences and thorough knowledge of the house, have been baffled they would be doubly so. I am determined to investigate the matter alone."

Something caught his eye as he spoke, and stooping he picked up from the carpet a small fragment of woolly substance. On examination this proved to be a wisp of common wadding.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, showing his find to Badger, "Our friends are careful folk, seemingly. They evidently packed my china with wadding to prevent a breakage."

Badger started. "Then they must be the gang who came last week, m'lord. If you remember, they did the same."

Lord Louis complimented his butler on his quick perception, and asked him to fetch the wrappings from the two Khang-he vases which the thieves had left behind on their last visit, so that he might compare the two specimens. While the man was gone Lord Louis cast about for further traces. His attention was attracted towards a small, circular red wafer of paper, lying on a part of a Persian rug whose

colour was identical to its own. The wafer was about the size of a sixpence, and bore the printed words, "Sylvester, Chemist." He recognized it at once as the kind used by chemists to stick to the corks, or metal tops, of the bottles they dispense. At this point, Badger returned with a large piece of wadding in his hand. Lord Louis took it mechanically, saying as he did so:

"Badger, did you open a parcel which Sylvester's sent for me yesterday, here, in the hall?"

"No, m'lord," replied Badger, somewhat taken aback by the apparent irrelevance of the question. "I opened it in your lordship's dressing-room."

"Then oblige me," said Lord Louis, "by going upstairs and seeing if there is a small red wafer, like this, on the corks of the three bottles from that parcel. There was also a small bottle of phenacetin which you might bring down with you. I shall be in the study."

When Badger returned he found his master occupied with the two pieces of wadding, which he was holding under a powerful lens.

"You were right," he said, without looking up. "Although I know little or nothing about the quality of wadding, there is no doubt these two specimens are of the same variety. It is fairly clear our visitors of last Thursday have honoured us with a return date. Have you brought what I asked?" Badger placed a little bottle of phenacetin tablets on the desk. "Thank you. And were the red wafers on the corks of the other bottles?"

"Yes, m'lord," replied the butler. "I have brought them down for you to see," drawing them from the pocket of his dressing-gown and handing them to his master.

"Ah," said Lord Louis, "that was thoughtful. You can go to bed now, Badger. I shan't require anything more."

Badger hesitated. "Will your lordship be all right?" he ventured. "I hardly like going under the circumstances."

"Why not?" said Lord Louis, turning his gaze upon the man. "You speak as though some one were likely to spring out on me; which argues that we have not searched the house thoroughly. But as we have done so the danger you apprehend is negligible. Good night." And Badger retired.

When he had gone Lord Louis drew up the reading lamp and turned his attention to the bottles. The little red wafer, he had found in the hall, was identical with those on the corks and the top of the phenacetin bottle. He reversed it and noticed that the gum had adhered but slightly to the object for which it had been intended, and had only lost its glossiness here and there. He then tried to remove one of the wafers from the cork, but found it resisted his efforts, and only came off after leaving a portion of paper behind. He took the phenacetin bottle in his hand and introduced the blade of a penknife between the metal top and the wafer, with the result that the wafer came away at once.

"Ah!" he said to himself, "evidently the one I

found came from a metal top and not a cork." So saying, he held up the screw top to the light. It was of the kind with which we are all familiar. A dull metal affair, stamped out about three threads to screw down to the glass, and the name of the compound it was destined to cover in relief letters on the top. The presence of this relief lettering was the reason why the paper seal did not adhere properly. Lord Louis realized this fact at once. He also realized that the only place where the gum would hold would be the extreme outward surfaces of these letters. Consequently the seal he had just detached would bear the word "phenacetin" on its reverse side in, what might be called, looking-glass writing. He made the experiment with a little hand mirror, so arranging that the light from the lamp made the gum shine everywhere except where the wafer had adhered. Without much difficulty he was able to decipher the word. Therewith he tried the same experiment with the one he had found. Here his difficulty was greater, as he did not know the word as he had done in the first case and the impression was worse. He could make out, however, that it began with a v and ended with an l. With infinite patience he at last succeeded in working out the other letters, and revealed the word "veronal."

Lord Louis leant back in his chair and caressed his nose. He knew very well that no one in his household ever used the drug, so the inference was obvious that the red wafer must have come from a bottle imported by the burglars. He racked his brains to find a

solution for the problem as to what advantage veronal, a drug used for promoting sleep, would provide for a man who would be requiring all his energies and alertness. In the midst of these reflections came the thought that the wafer might have fallen from the burglar's pocket when he had gone to it for some other object, in which case it would have no connection with the present crime at all. Lord Louis did not encourage this train of reasoning, for, having taken so much trouble to ascertain the word the wafer bore, he was loth to admit that the time had been ill-spent. Besides the word veronal had awakened in his brain a curious sense of imminent discovery. He was sure he had heard it recently in connection with some dishonourable transaction.

Then, in a flash, came the recollection of the conversation which had taken place in Sylvester's Chemist Store, when that mysterious customer had asked for a drug which would keep him asleep for twelve hours while at sea. Lord Louis recalled his subsequent meeting with this man, which had substantiated his belief that he was not going to sea at all. He also recalled how he had nudged his friend at his, Lord Louis', approach, and had remarked something in the language of the deaf and dumb. Could these two persons have anything to do with the robbery? There was little enough to connect them with it save the presence of the wafer in the hall and a vague belief that they were speaking of him as he passed them by.

The man's final remark as he left the chemist's

suddenly recurred to him with startling exactitude.

"It isn't the weather," he had said, in answer to a comment on the fineness of the day, "it's the infernal jogging about that finds a man."

What jogging about could he have been apprehending, since it was evident he had never even contemplated a sea voyage?

Lord Louis put his head in his hands and wrestled with the problem. Why should a man on dry land fear jogging about? He remained in this posture for fully ten minutes. Then he rose, struck one hand against the other, walked swiftly into the hall and halted before the Queen Anne chest which had been delivered at his abode on the previous evening.

Very gently he tried to open one of the drawers. It resisted his efforts. He was about to make an attempt upon the second when his eye was caught by a tiny morsel of white substance entangled in the brasswork by the keyhole. Carefully removing this, he carried it to the light. The shortest inspection sufficed, and, trembling with excitement, he exclaimed, "Wadding! Wadding!"

Wadding it was, and of the same variety as the piece he had picked up from the carpet and the specimen submitted by Badger.

His next move was to try to move the chest from the wall. It was all that he could do to prevent himself from shouting for joy when he found that his strength, which had achieved this object during the preceding evening, was now unequal to the task. The weight of the chest had increased by a great deal.

Lord Louis stepped back and surveyed it with an expanding smile. Then he rubbed his hands, and, chuckling softly to himself, went upstairs to awaken Badger for the second time.

This, however, proved unnecessary, for the excellent fellow, not satisfied as to his master's safety, was sitting up, fully dressed, in case he might be wanted. At the sight of Lord Louis' beaming face he rose, and made so bold as to ask the cause of his pleasure.

"Come downstairs, Badger," Lord Louis replied, without answering the question. "But, stay! Do you remember where that master key was put? The one I used for opening my desk when I mislaid my bunch the other day?"

"I placed it in the top drawer of your escritoire, my lord."

"Good!" said Lord Louis. "We will feach it at once."

The master key being found, Lord Louis led the way to the hall. "Now, Badger," he said, "if you will oblige me by unlocking the two drawers of that chest yonder I think you will be surprised at the contents."

Much mystified, Badged obeyed, the master key making short work of the two locks, and there was revealed to their eyes the satisfying spectacle of numbers of objects, of different shapes and sizes, faultlessly wrapped up in wadding covers.

"*Voila!*" said Lord Louis, in tones of pardonable pride. "We see before us all the property which was taken from my rooms to-night."

"But however did it find its way into this?" gasped Badger.

Lord Louis smiled. "It was placed there," he responded, "by our guest, who, if I mistake not, is now at rest pending the exertions of the morrow, when he hoped to convey them to a place of safety." Then, seeing the mystified expression on his butler's face, he continued: "I have reason to believe you will find the marauder, under the influence of a powerful narcotic, peacefully sleeping in the upper part of the chest."

Badger was too amazed for words, but he moved quickly forward and laid his ear against the side of the chest.

"Your lordship is right," he cried. "I can hear him breathing. Though how you found him out beats me. What's it mean, my lord?"

"Just this," replied Lord Louis. "This chest, which was innocently delivered by the railway men last night, contained this man. Unless I am very much mistaken, they will return this morning to fetch it away again, having been instructed that it was delivered at the wrong address. You remember the illegible writing on the label. That undoubtedly was intentional. I imagine they will receive orders to leave it elsewhere, although it is conceivable they may return it to the station cloak room, whence the thieves themselves will fetch it away to their own quarters. A neatly considered scheme, and but for that small wafer of red paper we found, one that could hardly

have miscarried. We will now release our friend from his enforced captivity.

"But what I can't understand," asked Badger, "is, how your lordship found out all this, and what makes your lordship think the man has taken a drug?"

"As to the first query, I must attribute the discovery to an overheard conversation and a certain amount of natural reasoning power. As to the second, I imagine him to be under the influence of veronal as a precaution against losing his nerve and betraying his presence. I happen to know that he has taken enough of the stuff to keep him unconscious for twelve hours; which, by the way," he exclaimed, with a new thought, "gives us a fairly shrewd idea of the hour he would expect to be released. He took the drug at two a. m., consequently at two p. m. this chest is expected to have arrived at its destination."

For the next twenty minutes they were occupied in opening the lid. This, of course, was bolted on the inside and not locked. Lord Louis would not allow Badger to prize it open, as already a plan was formulating in his mind. Eventually, by straining on the lid, they located where the bolts ran home into the side of the chest. The rest was easy. Lord Louis marked the spots, and, with a fine drill made two small holes. This done, he inserted a metal skewer and forced back the bolts from the outside.

As Lord Louis had foretold, they found within the figure of a man, lying on his side, in a veritable nest

of cushions. But here a surprise awaited them, for, although his features were hidden from their view, the person in question wore a beard, whereas the customer who had bought the veronal was clean-shaven.

Lord Louis rolled him over on his back, and recognized the deaf and dumb man who had been standing beside the other at the corner of the street. Evidently the author of the plot had not thought fit to risk his own hide on the adventure.

The veronal had done its work thoroughly, for the man made no movement whatever when the united labours of Lord Louis and his butler at last succeeded in lifting him from the inside of the chest.

"I think," said Lord Louis, "we will carry him up to the small room in the tower. There are bars before the window and a good lock on the door. There is little likelihood of his regaining consciousness for several hours, so we can leave him there with impunity."

"But wouldn't it be safer to hand him over to the police, m'lord?" suggested Badger.

"That may be necessary later on, but in the intervening time I prefer to keep him on the premises as a hostage. If we are to get any repose at all to-night the sooner we have him under lock and key the better."

Between them they carried the inert figure to the room indicated, and, placing a cushion beneath his head and a carafe of water at his elbow, left him to sleep off the stupefying effects of the drug. Lord Louis then returned to the hall, closed the lid of the

chest, and instructed Badger to bring him a cup of tea at eight-thirty. A quarter of an hour later he was lying in bed dreaming happily of the seven Khang-he vases, restored, in his imagination, to their appointed place on the Delft rack above the sideboard.

He breakfasted at nine-fifteen, and appeared to be in excellent spirits.

"Tell me, Badger," he said, "at what hour does the railway delivery van collect in this district?"

"Between half-past ten and eleven, m'lord," came the response.

"Then tell the chauffeur to drive at once to Sylvester's and fetch me a small cylinder of oxygen, a bottle of sal-volatile and some powerful salts. Also instruct the housekeeper to make up a parcel of appetizing sandwiches, and to fill a thermos flask with strong coffee. I shall require all these things by ten o'clock."

Badger bowed uncomprehendingly, and retired.

His breakfast finished, Lord Louis paid a visit to his prisoner, whose condition was still comatose. Satisfying himself on this point, he returned downstairs and directed his attention to the chest. The two drawers, which the night before had contained his treasures, he locked with the master key. He then opened the lid and contemplated the space within. He was so engaged when Badger entered, bearing the cylinder of oxygen and his other requirements.

Lord Louis took them and placed them carefully among the cushions in the interior of the chest.

Badger, unable to repress his curiosity, asked what was his master's purpose.

"I am going on a journey," replied Lord Louis. "And when I return I hope to bring with me the five Khang-he vases which were stolen last Thursday. While I am gone you will see that our guest upstairs does not move beyond the margins we have allotted him. If I am not back by four you will hand him over to the police and request them to investigate for my possible whereabouts."

Badger was aghast. "Your lordship is never thinking of getting into that chest!" he exclaimed.

"That is my intention," was the reply.

"But, your lordship!" cried the butler, "it's putting your head into the lion's mouth."

Lord Louis smiled. "Not necessarily," he replied. "Persons engaged in nefarious practices are not always to be feared, and the particular lion in this case is a man whose stature I have already had an opportunity of measuring."

"I can't say I like it, m'lord," said Badger. "I wish your lordship would consent to me coming with you."

Lord Louis looked first at the cavity in the chest and then at the portly figure confronting him.

"Much as I appreciate the spirit of your wish," he said, "I cannot but feel your additional presence might prove an embarrassment."

"Then your lordship will take a pistol with him?"

"No," said Lord Louis. "I have decided against

doing so. My arguments will probably be more efficacious than my shooting."

At this point a distant bell was audible, and Badger withdrew, to return a moment later with the grave announcement that the railway van was at the door, and a plea that his lordship would do well to alter his mind.

Lord Louis' answer was to throw a leg over the side of the chest and settle down within. Before closing the lid he repeated his former instructions, finishing up with the words:

"There is no occasion for approaching this enterprise in a spirit of pessimism. You will recall that the lid fastens on the inside, and should I find my position intolerable I can end it at will. Kindly instruct the carter to fetch me away," and drawing in his head, he closed the lid and shot the bolts.

Badger watched the procession depart with as much solemnity as he could have bestowed if his master's earthly remains were journeying to their final resting-place.

Lord Louis' own thoughts followed somewhat the same line as his butler's. From the moment that the two vanmen lifted him from the ground he could not refrain from imagining his mortal clay was being conveyed to the cemetery. This thought, however, was mercifully dislocated by a comment from one of the men, who, prefacing his remark with a lurid adjective, called heaven to witness that the weight of his load was more than he actually cared to under-

take. There was an unpleasant moment when the chest was being hoisted into the cart. It would not have been so bad if they had chosen to raise his head end first. But the Fates decreed otherwise, and for a period which seemed interminable Lord Louis found himself in a position more suited to an acrobat than a respected member of the aristocracy. When at length he had recovered a horizontal position he realized that he had ricked his neck somewhat severely. He comforted himself with the reflection that a period of immunity awaited him, until such a time as he should be delivered at the station cloak room; but to brace up his nerves he determined to inhale a little from the smelling salts. The narrow space did not permit of much freedom of movement, and he found he was quite unable to reach anything beyond the level of his knees. This was provoking, as he distinctly remembered having placed the smelling salts below that line. The cart was jogging along, with many bumps, at a slow rate of progress. This motion set Lord Louis' brain at work, devising a scheme for becoming possessed of the bottle.

Below the more ample portion of his frame was a large cushion. Lord Louis conceived that if he held this close to his body and at the same time braced his head and his feet against the sides of the chest he would be able to raise himself up and allow any loose articles to roll about with the motion of the van. This scheme he put into operation, and had the gratification of hearing the bottle running backwards and forwards on the bare boards. Unfortunately, it

showed an indisposition to roll in the right direction, and it was not until he had nearly exhausted himself by the exertion required that a lucky bump in the road sent it rolling in the required direction. Judging the moment to be ripe, he descended upon it with his full weight. But the shock of this descent was more than the frail glass bottle could withstand. "Crack!" it went, and a moment later the intensely powerful odor of ammonia filled Lord Louis' nostrils. The predicament was a nasty one, for, as he speedily realized, the air would in time become so saturated with the fumes as to cause asphyxiation. Already he experienced a choking sensation and a parlyzing stinging of the eyes. In another few moments he would have to open the lid or suffocate miserably like a moth in a killing bottle. As luck would have it, the van drew up at this moment, and the man on the tailboard alighted and entered a house. Lord Louis was gasping for breath when he heard him return and call upon his mate to lend a hand with a packing-case. The driver, protesting slightly, climbed from the box, and their footsteps were heard crunching on the gravel of the path.

In an instant Lord Louis had drawn the bolts and raised the lid. Regardless of the fragments of broken glass he grabbed up the saturated sponge from the inside of the smelling-bottle and hurled it out into the street. Remembering his discomfiture when the chest was raised into the cart, he transposed his original position, and lay down with his feet where his head had been. As he was lowering the lid he caught

sight of the two men, through a hole in the side of the van cover, returning down the garden path, struggling under the burden of what was apparently a hamper of great heaviness. Accordingly, he shot the bolts and lay still.

He felt the bump as the hamper was hoisted on to the tail-board and the men climbed up beside it.

"Where'll yer 'ave it, Jack?" one of the men demanded.

"Shove it on top of this 'ere," the other replied. "I've got some boxes to collect from the Royal, and 'll want a bit o' room."

"Won't it scratch the polish?" said the first speaker. "It's got a 'With Care' label on it?"

"Don't matter about that," said the second, and an instant later he heard the whack of the heavy hamper on the top of his resting-place.

The sensation of being thus cut off from escape bore solemnly on Lord Louis' mind. It was one thing to shut oneself in a box from which one could retreat at will, but quite another to know that there was a weight of unliftable material between oneself and freedom. He gathered what comfort he could from the reflection that had this happened ten minutes earlier he would certainly have perished from the ammonia fumes, but the comfort was small and quite outweighed by the sense of depression. He felt like a child alone in a dark room and beset by horrors. He longed to cry out — to beat at the walls of his prison — anything to escape from the surrounding nightmare. This was claustrophobia, he reflected. Men

who were buried alive must have felt the pangs he was suffering now.

"Come, come," said Lord Louis, "this will never do. I must pull myself together. Perhaps a little coffee from the flask would brace me up."

Fortunately the flask was accessible, and the task of pouring out a draught into the metal cup, from the top of the thermos, presented so many difficulties that he partially forgot his fears. When eventually he succeeded in achieving this object he found that it was well-nigh impossible to drink. For one thing the coffee was exceedingly hot, and, for another, in the extreme darkness he was unable to find his mouth. The net result was to pour the major portion of the fluid down his collar where its calorific action temporarily deprived him of all other sense of grievance.

After many tribulations the van arrived at the station and he was deposited, without much inconvenience, in the cloak room.

He knew it must be the cloak room on account of the sound of many twopences rattling on a wooden counter, and of a man's voice protesting that unless somebody hurried up he would assuredly lose his train.

He was feeling easier in his mind now that the packing-case had been removed, but to prevent a repetition of the recurrence he tore a sheet from his notebook on which he scribbled the words: "It is forbidden to place heavy objects on this chest."

There was a small crack next to one of the hinges through which he inserted this legend. He had no

sooner done so, however, than he became oppressed with doubts as to whether it was not more likely to act as an incentive, rather than a deterrent. Accordingly he withdrew the paper, very slowly, so as not to attract attention. The care required for this operation afforded some temporary mental relief and occupied him until he became aware of a voice, which he recognized as belonging to the former customer at the chemist's, demanding whether a chest had been left for him.

Realizing he was about to start on the final stage of his journey, Lord Louis' spirits rose with a bound. He determined to indulge in a sandwich to celebrate the occasion. He had but little trouble to find the package, but at the first touch of it he felt that the contents were somewhat crushed as a result of his movements.

By this time he was conscious of being moved again. The man who had bought the veronal was organizing his bearers and enjoining them to exercise the greatest care.

This point Lord Louis noted with double satisfaction: firstly, on his own account; and, secondly, because it argued an affectionate regard for his accomplice. A man who could feel so tenderly for a comrade's welfare would inevitably prove amenable to the arguments that he, Lord Louis, proposed to bring forth.

While these thoughts were running through his brain he was wrestling with the string encirling his luncheon. Unhappily, the excellent Badger had fas-

tened it with a knot which would have defied the ingenuity of a seafaring man, even granted the use of all his faculties. Lord Louis abandoned the effort, satisfying himself by tearing away some of the paper and taking haphazard bites at the contents. It occurred to him that his manœuvres must have resembled those of a baby making its first unaided effort to partake of solids.

They had been driving now, as he estimated, for about ten minutes, and as he had not overheard any conversation, he argued that his friend the burglar was alone and probably at the reins. The atmosphere in his narrow cell was becoming fœtid, and his heart gave a leap of joy when the cart unexpectedly drew up. They had arrived. He heard the driver leap from the box. What would the next development be? Would he go within and summon further accomplices to help carry the precious freight? Apparently not. There was quite a long interval, during which nothing occurred save the sound of the man's footsteps retreating, as it sounded, up the street. Immediately a great hope was born in Lord Louis' mind. There were no other accomplices, and the man had gone to enlist casual labour for the unloading.

Lord Louis felt his chances of success increasing by leaps and bounds. He determined that now was the moment to indulge himself in a little oxygen, the exhilarating effects of which would banish the sensation of exhaustion occasioned by his strenuous journey.

At the first hiss of the escaping gas he felt wonderfully revived, and when his janitor returned a few moments later, accompanied by two men, whose accents suggested humble upbringing, he was so elated that it was all he could do to prevent himself from bursting into song. As far as he could judge, he was carried up one flight of stairs, mercifully head first this time, and here deposited. He heard the chink of money and an exchange of farewells. Then the closing of the front door and the footsteps of the burglar returning. This person seemed in excellent spirits, for he was whistling gaily and rattling his feet in some kind of impromptu breakdown. He approached the chest, and, grasping the handle at the side, lifted it an inch or two from the ground and dropped it again. This performance was repeated three times, and Lord Louis surmised it was a prearranged signal to denote that the journey was ended.

"Still asleep, Jack?" said the man. "It's a pity you are deaf, my mate, because you might hear me telling you that you're home, sonny, home."

Judging the moment was ripe to make his presence known Lord Louis drew back the bolts and, flinging up the lid, sprang to his feet.

The effect was electrical. The man before him staggered back as though shot.

"You must forgive me," said Lord Louis, "for making an entrance which may lead you to believe I am a clown, for my mission here is of a serious nature. I have come to demand the restoration of

the five Khang-he vases you stole from my house last Thursday night."

For a space the man made no reply, then he blurted out:

"What have you done with my mate?"

Lord Louis smiled. "I am pleased to find you a person of such solicitude," he said. "You will more readily appreciate the pains I have been at to secure this interview."

"If you've handed him over to the police——" began the other, advancing with a menacing gesture. "If you've done that——"

Lord Louis stepped clear of the chest. "I did not say I had," he remarked. "I have, however, made certain dispositions, and it will rest with you whether or no he is accorded a fate which you richly deserve to share."

"Tell me what you're driving at, and be quick about it."

"Certainly," said Lord Louis. "If you would oblige me with your name — any name will do — it would facilitate conversation."

"Make it Jones then," came the reply.

Lord Louis bowed. "Very well, Mr. Jones, let us sit down," suiting the action to the word. "When I discovered your friend, last night, after he had made a determined effort to deprive me of some valuable trifles, I arrived at a conclusion, or rather two conclusions, relative to your character. The first, that you were a person of no great personal courage, and

the second, that you were possessed of gentle feelings and a kindly disposition."

"I'll trouble you not to be funny," said Jones. "You may find you've made a mistake!"

"Had you been courageous," pursued Lord Louis imperturbably, "you would not have sent your friend on so perilous a journey — you would have gone yourself. As to the kindly disposition, that is proved to the hilt by the solicitude you showed in the matter of cushions for the inside of the chest and the purchase of veronal to subdue the mental anxieties and physical discomfiture such an undertaking would inevitably incur. Consequently I argued that if I held your partner as a hostage I could count on regaining my property, at the price of his release, without exposing myself to any undue risk of violence. If you will kindly fetch the vases and call me a taxi I guarantee that your friend shall be restored to you as soon as I reach my home and no further proceedings be taken in the matter. Do you agree?"

For answer Mr. Jones drew from his pocket a six-shooter and presented it at Lord Louis' head.

"No, I don't," he said, "and you can listen to me. You are in my power, d'you know that? Nobody knows where you are, and that's a trump card you didn't reckon on. There's a sheet of paper there and a pencil; write down these words —'Release man at once. If he has not returned by five o'clock I shall be shot'— sign, and address it to the chap who has charge of him."

"But, my dear Mr. Jones," said Lord Louis, dep-

recatingly, "I have arranged that your afflicted partner shall be handed over to the authorities at four, if I have not returned by that time. Added to which I am far too truthful a person to even suggest the possibility of being shot. I must really implore you to approach this matter in a rational spirit. Even assuming that you intimidated me into writing such a fable, there is no one, save yourself, who could be dispatched with it; and you would hardly expect me to remain here, in resigned inactivity, against your return."

"The rest of the gang 'd keep an eye on you."

"You forget the 'rest of the gang,' by whom I imagine you are alluding to your deaf companion, is incarcerated at my house. The casual labour you enlisted to have this chest carried up here argues that the gang is strictly limited to two. No, my friend, we are wasting time," and he rose to his feet.

Jones backed towards the door, covering him with the pistol.

"You'd better look out," he warned. "If this goes off it will be your fault."

"Pooh!" said Lord Louis. "A man who hasn't the courage to spend the night in a wooden chest is in no danger of committing a murder. If you decline to fetch the vases I must ransack the house myself until I find them." So saying he walked boldly towards the door, and brushing Jones aside stepped forth on to the landing.

This seemingly utter disregard for danger was more than Jones could hope to resist.

"Here, hold on!" he said, lowering his weapon. "If I give 'em to you, you'll stand by what you said? My friend goes free and you don't put the police on our track?"

"I never repeat a promise," said Lord Louis, wearily. "It is for you to recall what I have said."

"Oh, all right! You shall have 'em."

Five minutes later Lord Louis was superintending the packing of the five Khang-he vases.

"You need not be sparing with the wadding," he remarked. "You can exercise just the same care as you did when you removed them from my house."

Jones ground his teeth. "If you hadn't got hold of my mate I should have put a bullet through you," he jerked out, and led the way to the front door.

Lord Louis smiled. "Perhaps," he said, "you will do me credit for having realized that fact when taking certain precautions for his safe custody."

He opened the door and stepped on to the pavement, colliding as he did so with some one who was on the point of entering. He looked up, and found himself face to face with the deaf and dumb man. The recognition was mutual, and from the background came a cry of astonishment from Jones.

"Grip him!" shouted Jones, forgetful for the instant of his friend's infirmity.

Lord Louis caught the words, and at the same time the sight of a policeman at the opposite corner.

His mind worked quickly. In a second he knew he would be dragged back into the house and overpowered. He raised his voice, and cried:

"Officer!"

At the same moment Jones' hand had dropped heavily on his shoulder. The policeman heard and crossed towards the little group. Jones' hand fell to his side.

"Officer!" said Lord Louis again. "I am sorry to trouble you, but would you be so good as to use your whistle to obtain me a cab. I have an important engagement," and his fingers travelled suggestively to his waistcoat pocket.

"Certainly, sir," replied the constable. "There is a rank at the cross road." He drew his whistle and gave two short blasts.

Lord Louis turned to address Jones. "You see, Mr. Jones," he said, "I have kept my promise, and, as I judge, it was only by an accident of Fate you were withheld from keeping yours. Kindly make my respects to your friend, as my ignorance of the deaf and dumb language denies me the privilege. Good afternoon."

And handing a half sovereign to the constable he entered the cab which had just drawn up.

. . . . . .

Badger greeted him on his return with a gratitude not far removed from tears.

"Thank heaven your lordship is safe," he cried.

"Yes," said Lord Louis. "I am quite safe, and here are the missing vases. But I must say, Badger, that your leniency with our prisoner nearly encompassed my undoing."

"I wish I had him here now, m'lord," said the man, with an unexpected access of emotion.

He went on to explain how he had visited the prisoner a dozen times, according to instructions, and how on the last occasion the sleeper had suddenly awakened, and, grasping him by the throat, had reversed their positions, and locking him in, had made good his escape.

"I didn't come to for a quarter of an hour, m'lord," he plaintively added, "and then, of course, he was gone. Oh, m'lord, will you ever forgive me?"

But Lord Louis was smiling happily to himself, as he replaced the seven Khang-he vases on the Delft rack above the sideboard in the dining-room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE THIRTEENTH CHAIR

SARAH peeled off her long gloves and threw them on the Chippendale table in Lord Louis' dining-room.

"Uncle Louis," she said, "I am going to have it out with you."

Lord Louis Lewis shuffled his feet on the Persian rug before the fire. The effort to meet her eyes was a failure, and he turned about and began to fidget with a large Mazarine jar on the mantel-shelf.

Sarah watched his discomfiture with a stern and steady eye.

"You will please sit down," she said. "Those vases will do very well as they are."

"If they were a trifle closer together," he began, rather feebly; but Sarah would have none of it.

"I have not driven twenty miles and gone without my tea for the pleasure of talking about china," she said. "What are you ringing the bell for?"

"Some tea," said Lord Louis.

"I don't want any."

"A mistake," said Lord Louis to the butler, who had entered; "nothing, Badger, thanks."

When the man had withdrawn Sarah re-commenced her persecution.

"There is nothing to be gained in trying to prevent me talking, Uncle Louis," she said; "so you may as well sit down and get it over."

Once more his eyes sought hers, and he realized that her resolution was stronger than his opposition. He did not give in without a struggle, however.

"If I have caused you any displeasure, Sarah," he said, "I'm sorry. Let us leave it at that."

"Certainly not," she replied.

Lord Louis reflected that Portia must have looked much as Sarah looked then. Less beautiful, of course, for who could compare with Sarah in the matter of looks? But the same expression of calm confidence must have existed in both of them.

"Since you are determined to harangue me," he said, "let us go to the smoking-room and be comfortable. You resemble a judge at the end of this long table."

"So much the better," she replied. "These chairs are quite comfortable enough."

"They were by the hand of Chippendale himself," interposed Lord Louis, to create a diversion; "and, I venture to think, of his finest mood. There is no other set like it. Do you observe how, on the back slat of each, a number is cunningly fretted into the design? The carver at this end is number one. The corresponding one, on which you are sitting, number seven. Then we have five chairs on the left, and there were six, in the original intention, for the right."

Sarah followed the direction of his gaze.

"Five, you mean," she said. "They are all there."

"The set is incomplete. The thirteenth chair is missing." His thoughts seemed very far away.

Sarah humoured him to the extent of inquiring what had become of the thirteenth chair.

"Lost," he replied. "My father sent it to a local upholsterer to be re-webbed, while he was away on the Continent for a few weeks. When he returned the chair and the upholsterer had both disappared. It was said in the village the man had got into financial difficulties. My father did all in his power to recover it, but never succeeded. He took the loss greatly to heart, and when I grew up he urged me to do all I could to trace it."

"But you did not succeed."

"Oh, yes. I did succeed."

"Then why ——?"

"It is a long story," he answered, "and I am not quite sure this is the best moment to confide it. Do let me get you some tea?"

"No," said Sarah. "You have wasted quite enough time talking about the thirteenth chair, which has nothing whatever to do with what I mean to say to you."

"One never knows!" he responded, meditatively. "Well, go to it, Sarah; I have resigned myself to listen." So saying, he seated himself at the head of the table, facing her, and composed his hands upon its glowing surface.

"To begin with," said Sarah, very matter of fact,

"why did you run away?" He raised his eyebrows in a mute query. "Yes," she continued, "what reason had you to desert our party at a few hours' notice, when everything was going so beautifully?"

Lord Louis deliberated, then said: "You only asked me for a fortnight, and I had stayed three weeks."

"Uncle Louis, you are being wilfully dense."

"I assure you ——"

"Yes, you are. You know very well what I mean. Do you want me to give you up altogether?"

"I should be inexpressibly grieved," he answered, in a hopeful tone.

"You sorely tempt me," said Sarah. "I expect I should, if I didn't happen to be so horribly in your debt."

"I had no idea you were."

"Without your help I should never have married Cedric."

"Oh, that!" said Lord Lewis, waiving such a trifle aside.

"Yes, that. And on the day you made father consent, I vowed I would do the same for you."

"Really!" said he, beginning to rise. "If I had known your intentions I should not have acted as I did."

"And you have been a disappointement," she continued, ignoring his interruption. "Three times I have tried, and every time you have broken away. I didn't mind so much the first twice, because Dulcie Musgrave wouldn't have suited you, and I can see now

the exact sort of girl that Marjorie Jocelyn is. It's this last time I can't forgive you."

Lord Louis tried to look bewildered.

"Do you know, I had almost begun to tell people about it?"

Lord Louis began to look uneasy.

"Let us understand who it is we are talking about," said he, with surprising boldness.

"If you don't know that I mean Jill, Uncle Louis, your reputation for sanity has been falsely earned."

"Ah! Of course, Miss Jill! I hope she is very well, Sarah?"

It was quite a creditable performance, but he had to light a cigarette to help him carry it through. The artifice was wasted on Sarah, however, who merely remarked:

"She has red eyes."

"Dear me!" said Lord Louis; "how terrible! They were so blue when I saw her last."

"Crying makes people's eyes red," commented Sarah.

He did not reply at once, but when he did the tone of banter had gone from his voice. "Sarah," he said, "a girl of twenty-five does not shed many tears for a man of forty-eight."

Sarah flared up. "How do you know?" she demanded. "Your life is spent among things which have no tears. China, glass and furniture. You know less about women than that old grandfather clock there — and you care less, too."

"That is not very true, Sarah," he answered.

"Isn't it? Then why have you never married? Why do you always go so far and no farther? Why did you bolt when everything was shaping right?"

"What a lot of questions to choose from! I hardly know where to start the answers."

"Didn't you like Jill?" she said, giving him another.

"Surely," he replied, "and you know I do. I like her very greatly. She is your cousin, Sarah, and she might be you over again."

"Exactly," exclaimed Sarah, "and that's why I thought ——" She stopped, blushed a little, and changed the sentence to: "You surely can't like being a bachelor?"

"No," he said. "I cannot say that I do."

"Then why ——?"

"It is a state," he replied, "that some are born to, some acquire and others have thrust upon them."

"What does that mean?" she asked quickly.

"It means —— If I were to tell you a story, Sarah, to how many people would you repeat it?"

"If you asked me to keep it to myself I should, at any rate, try," she responded.

He smiled, pushed his cigarette case towards her, and began to talk.

And here is the story which Lord Louis Lewis confided to his niece, Sarah Milwood, as the two sat facing each other over the long table, and the lavender of the evening greyed into black.

I have not given it in his own words, for that would deny the reader several essential points of the narra-

tive, which Lord Louis would have been the last man in the world to repeat.

. . . . . .

The drawing-room in which Mrs. Sheridan was seated possessed all those elements of hideousness which twenty years ago passed for smartness.

Upon the heavily decorated Axminster carpet stood a suite of black furniture, upholstered in a shrewd green plush. The designer's inspiration had caused him to include, in the heterogeneous patterns of his handiwork thin wooden bars which crossed and recrossed each other and had no part in beauty, comfort or construction. They existed merely to torment the eye.

An over-mantel of many mirrors vied with the cabinet, which faced it, to reflect the horrors of the apartment in a thousand moods of perspective. Plaques grinned on the walls — plaques representing highly-coloured gondoliers, or olive-skinned Italian maidens, framed in maroon velvet and in green. Here and there suspended segments of cut bamboo, articulated with holes, like monstrous flutes. From these holes dyed pampas grass and Cape cherries reared their shameless heads.

The ball-fringed drapery of the mantel-piece failed to conceal a glass screen, painted with irises, which superseded the fire during the summer months.

A conservatory led from the drawing-room, from which shrill plants hurled green defiance at the poppy-laden wallpaper.

Such was the drawing-room of Mrs. Monteagle

Sheridan — a counterpart, in fact, of ninety per cent. of the drawing-rooms of that past mid-Victorian period — and such an apartment which, barely twenty years ago, betokened an owner of taste, degree, and understanding.

Mrs. Sheridan was the widow of General Sheridan, a splendid old fellow, who fell to a hillman's blade not very far from the Khyber Pass.

It may be argued that this is an unusual death for generals, their rank entitling them to vantages secure from inquiring cutlery, but General Sheridan had never survived the subaltern joys of matching his own prowess against that of his foe. Whenever a scrimmage occurred the old veteran, after laying his dispositions for the conduct of the engagement, sallied forth in search of private conclusions.

To this primitive instinct was due the widowhood of Mrs. Sheridan, and, perhaps, the adventurous spirit of her daughter Sylvaine.

Sylvaine was an utterily fearless young lady, and there was no foolhardy action which the boys accomplished that she didn't do as well, or, at any rate, have a shot at doing. She was the kind of girl who would stand up fearlessly to a full-slogged cricket ball, and, like as not, catch it.

In addition to her daring she was very generously dowered with good looks. Indeed, in this respect, she would have been hard to rival.

Altogether, there was nothing very much the matter with Sylvaine Sheridan. She was a bit of a tomboy, perhaps, and the very critical might have

accused her of possessing only an outdoor intelligence. It is true she was not well read, neither did she distinguish herself in the arenas of art or argument, but these matters were of secondary importance, so she thought, to horses, dogs and the really vital things of life. Naturally, this is a point on which there may be two opinions, but it has truly been written that it takes some of all sorts to make a world, and we need think none the less of her for preferring physical to mental accomplishments.

Mrs. Sheridan, the mother, was a very good sort, although something of a bigot. She did all things by rote — having formulated a method of dealing with every contingency of life and death. She was an excellent housekeeper, a good mother, and a poor conversationalist. In the matter of trifles her obstinacy was phenomenal. She insisted, always, on her own way, even though shown a better.

Every night, before retiring to bed, she personally supervised the fastening of all doors and windows. This done, she placed dust-sheets over the furniture and pieces of newspapers about the mantelpiece bronzes (classic nudes wrestling with untractable steeds), and such of the pictures which came into contact with the early rays of the sun. She then descended to the kitchen level, lit a candle, turned off the gas at the meter, mounted to the dining-room, collected the plate basket and a daguerreotype of her late husband and retired therewith to rest, with the pleasant consciousness of nothing neglected.

But to revert to our narrative at the point where

the good lady was first introduced to the reader.

A maid-servant came in and announced the Rev. Smythe-Marloe and Mr. Francis Straker.

As a persistent church-goer the name of the Vicar was naturally familiar and welcome; with his friend, however, Mrs. Sheridan was not acquainted.

"We have come," said the Vicar, the usual formalities of introduction having been observed, "on an errand of supplication which, I am sure, will commend itself to you, as one of our chief parishioners." Mrs. Sheridan bowed non-committally. "There has been of late," continued the prelate, "a growing disposition to revive the use of antique furniture." He cast his eyes over the appointments of the room. "It is hard to conceive," he pursued, "why people should prefer worm-eaten and out-worn specimens of extinct eras, when they are able to indulge their tastes in the charming products of the present day." With a wave of the hand he leant back, greatly imperilling the safety of at least one charming product, whose miserable legs creaked warningly beneath his weight.

Mrs. Sheridan smiled her acknowledgment of the gracious tribute, and offered him another chair, less artistic, perhaps, but more secure.

From this new coign of vantage the Vicar took up the tale.

"Now, it occurred to my friend, Mr. Straker," he said, "that we might put to a good and religious use the fruits of this new vogue. It has long been a cherished desire of mine, and many members of the

parish, to instal a rose window in the church. Mr. Straker has suggested the means by which this laudable ambition could become a reality."

Mr. Straker pulled his moustache modestly, as one disclaiming his own ingenuity.

"Nearly every one possesses in some attic, lumber or, maybe, maid's bedroom, an example of Sherringdàle or Chippenwhite."

"Chippendale or Sheraton," interposed Mr. Straker, with the utmost politeness.

The Vicar accepted the correction with some reserve, and continued: "So it occurred to him that I should beg each person who has the benefit of the church at heart to provide a piece of antique furniture for a sale. The proceeds of the sale would be devoted, exclusively, to the beautifying of our place of worship in the manner I have indicated. Our call today is dedicated to the hope that you will offer to help us."

Mrs. Sheridan puckered her brow. "I should have been delighted, Vicar," she said, "but I am a person who never did believe in harbouring rubbish. Everything here is new and the best, so I am afraid I can think of nothing to contribute to the sale."

"Unfortunate," said the Vicar, "most unfortunate."

Mr. Francis Straker cleared his throat and pardoned himself.

"I had an idea," he said, "that I caught sight of rather a fine old chair in a dark recess of your hall. Perhaps the light deceived my vision."

"To be sure," said Mrs. Sheridan; "I had forgotten all about that. It is a horrid affair my husband picked up at a sale many years ago. He insisted I should never part with it. Mary!" to a servant who had just brought in the tea things, "fetch that chair from the hall. You know, the one under the Landseer picture. That's it," when, a moment later, the maid had dragged a massive mahogany armchair into the room. "It is a hideous great thing, is it not?"

The Vicar shook his head and clicked his tongue sympathetically, but Mr. Straker crossed to where the chair was standing.

"As a matter of fact, Mrs. Sheridan," he said, "this is a very fine piece of Chippendale."

Mrs. Sheridan smiled a little. "It may be," she vouchsafed, "but, personally, my esteem for it is small. My poor husband used to say it was the only thing in the house that was fit to look at. But he was really just the soldier and nothing more. He didn't understand! However!"

"Well," said Mr. Straker, "may we not persuade you to allow us to include this chair in our sale? I am sure our gratitude would be very sincere."

Mrs. Sheridan shook her head. "I am afraid not," she said. "I do not think he would have approved of my parting with it. I would not mind lending it to you for the afternoon."

"You are very kind," murmured the Vicar; "but unhappily, every exhibit will have to bear a price."

"Under those circumstances," began Mrs. Sheridan, but Mr. Straker interposed.

"I venture to think, Vicar," he said, "the inclusion of this piece would give a decided *cachet* to our enterprise. I am sure many people would be most interested. This back slat, for instance, is remarkable. Do you see the number thirteen has been worked into the design? I should suggest that Mrs. Sheridan place a prohibitive price on the chair to avoid the danger of its finding a purchaser."

"I do not mind doing that," said Mrs. Sheridan. "How much would you say? About three pounds ten?"

Mr. Straker mused. "To safeguard yourself entirely I should put it a little higher," he said.

The Vicar laughed as a preliminary to making a joke. It was a habit of his, and set the mood of his audience.

"Why not say two hundred and fifty?" he suggested.

"Excellent," approved Mrs. Sheridan, and it was settled at that.

A van collected the mahogany chair and carried it off to the Parish Room, where it breathed freely, the first time for many years, in a mixed assemblage of congenial companions.

Mrs. Sheridan, as a contributor, received an invitation to attend the sale, and put in an appearance about five o'clock.

She encountered the Vicar in the hall, who, on see-

ing her, suddenly developed acute nasal trouble, which deprived him of coherent speech. He coughed and blew his nose to the most alarming degree. She also caught a glimpse of Mr. Francis Straker, who, instead of hastening to greet her, disappeared abruptly in the opposite direction. Thus Mrs. Sheridan went the round alone, and, with that sense which causes an artist to visit his own picture before all others, gravitated towards the spot where her chair was standing.

She noted, with gratification, a number of people had gathered before it. She also noted that the price label bore a red wafer with the word "sold."

"My gracious me!" exclaimed Mrs. Sheridan, with startling emphasis. "Who has dared?"

The bystanders shifted their attention from the astonishing spectacle of a chair which had been sold for two hundred and fifty pounds, to its late owner. They marked, with interest, the rising colour in her cheeks.

A young man, wearing a bunch of ribbons in his buttonhole, to denote the office of steward, bore down on the group and was promptly seized by Mrs. Sheridan.

"That chair was mine," she insisted. "What is the meaning of that red label?"

"It means," responded the young man, mistaking her indignation for joy, "that the chair has been sold for two hundred and fifty. How very delighted you must be."

"Fetch the Vicar," said Mrs. Sheridan, through compressed lips.

When the be-ribboned steward found the Vicar and explained who wanted him the reverend gentleman showed a disposition to remove from the building. Probably he would have done so but for the inopportune loss of his hat. Fearful of the effect his uncovered head might create among his parishioners he abandoned the intention to fly, and followed meekly to where Mrs. Sheridan awaited him.

"Vicar," she said, losing no time, "I expressly stated, under no circumstances was that chair to be sold."

The Vicar began to walk on different squares of the linoleum as though his life depended on it.

"If I remember rightly," he murmured, through a mask created by his handkerchief, "you consented to our offering the chair for two hundred and fifty pounds."

"I said it was not to be sold."

"Two hundred and fifty pounds is a lot of money. We hardly expected to realize more from the entire sale," came from the Vicar, who appeared absorbed in a defect of the wallpaper.

"The General told me I must never part with the chair, and I shall respect his wishes. I don't know who has bought it, but I do know that he can't have it."

The Vicar tried a new line of persuasion.

"Surely, my dear Mrs. Sheridan," he said, "the

addition of a rose window to the chancel must be dearer to your heart than the possession of this cumbersome example of furniture."

"That is not the point," she said. "What I say I mean. If this young man" (indicating the steward) "will tell one of the choir boys to fetch me a fly, I will take it away at once."

The Vicar was horror-struck. "It is impossible!" he cried. "The money has been paid and receipted."

"By whom was it receipted?" demanded Mrs. Sheridan.

"Not by me," hastily, from the Vicar. "Our friend, Mr. Straker, accomplished the sale."

"Fetch him."

"Unfortunately, he has been called away ——" he hesitated; "right away."

"Very well," said Mrs. Sheridan, with a defiant toss of the head, "as he made the arrangements, he can unmake them."

The Vicar's voice was very plaintive.

"Come, my dear Mrs. Sheridan, is it not possible for us to arrive at a compromise? Let me suggest that you share with the rose window the profits of the transaction. That you accept one hundred and twenty-five pounds and allow things to remain as they are. I am sure, if we approach this matter in the proper spirit, we shall see how very providential the sale of this chair will prove."

But Mrs. Sheridan's patience was exhausted. Seizing the arms of the chair she dragged it towards the door, the Vicar fluttering impotently in the back-

ground. There was a fly at the porch, and Mrs. Sheridan imperatively ordered the driver to place the burden on the top. Then, without a word of farewell, she drove away.

"This will be the cause of endless trouble," wailed the Vicar, as the vehicle bearing the indignant lady disappeared round the corner.

Arrived home Mrs. Sheridan found her daughter Sylvaine, who had just returned from a day's hunting, and told her all that had occurred.

Sylvaine thought it was a great joke.

"I don't see how we can keep it, mother. It isn't ours any longer."

"That chair is not going away from here again," said Mrs. Sheridan, with a note of finality, "and there the matter ends."

But the matter did not end there. For at eleven-thirty the next morning a card was brought to Mrs. Sheridan bearing the name of Lord Louis Lewis.

"Show the gentleman in," she said, placing an intimate garment on which she had been working, under the shelter of a sofa cushion.

A moment later a young man of medium height, faultlessly dressed in riding clothes, came into the room. He had a smooth head of hair, warm brown in colour, a fair moustache, and very blue and steady eyes. His head was well poised on his shoulders, and he inclined it politely to his hostess on entering.

"I trust you will forgive the informality of so early a call," he said, "but my business will not occupy more than a moment. I am here to fetch

away a chair, which I bought yesterday at the Parish Hall."

Mrs. Sheridan's face assumed severe lines.

"The chair is not for sale," was all she said.

"I am well aware of that," replied Lord Louis. "Nothing in the world would induce me to part with it."

"What I wish you to understand," said Mrs. Sheridan, icily, "is that I have no intention of selling the chair."

"It would hardly be in your power to do so," he returned, "since I have already bought it and carry in my pocket the receipt." He drew out a letter-case as he spoke.

"There has been a mistake," said Mrs. Sheridan, impatiently. "I merely lent the chair and nothing more."

"Yet it bore a label stating that the price was two hundred and fifty pounds."

"That was done as a precaution to avoid the risk of its finding a purchaser."

"Then I am right in assuming you consented to a price being placed upon it?"

"For the reason I have already stated. Yes."

"That being so, you have no power whatever to withhold the delivery of my property. Even at the risk of incurring your displeasure I must insist——"

"Lord Louis," cut in Mrs. Sheridan, "that chair has been in my family for thirty years, and is not going out of it."

"Mrs. Sheridan," he replied, "the chair has been in

my family for a hundred and thirty years, and is coming back where it belongs."

"Possession," said she, "is nine points of the law."

"And legally," said he, "I am the possessor."

"We shall see who has it in the end."

"The conclusion is already obvious," he remarked, and walked towards the door. "I shall do myself the pleasure of calling again in the course of a few days. In the intervening time I trust you will not be too greatly inconvenienced."

He bowed and withdrew.

Shortly after a greengrocer called and demanded that the chair should be delivered to him. He was sent away empty-handed. During the afternoon, at intervals of about twenty minutes, eight different people presented themselves with a similar request.

At dinner that evening callers came to the front and back doors simultaneously, greatly impeding the service of the courses. Every one who came was very polite. They asked for the chair, were refused, and went their several ways uncomplaining.

Mrs. Sheridan was very angry indeed, and when the Vicar dropped in, at coffee time, with the plea that she should reconsider her decision of yesterday, his welcome lacked the cordiality to which he was accustomed.

The domestic staff retired to bed in a state of revolt, declaring they had never before been so run off their feet, and if there was much more of it they would know how to act.

Sylvaine was the only person who retained her calm. She was sympathetic with her mother, but secretly nourished the greatest amusement at the action Lord Louis was taking.

About three a. m. Mrs. Sheridan was aroused from her slumbers by thunderous knocking at the front door. Believing the house to be afire, she donned a dressing-gown and descended, only to find an individual on the doorstep who asked if the hour would be convenient to fetch away the chair.

Mrs. Sheridan slammed the door in his face, and went back to bed in a condition bordering on frenzy.

The postman, next morning, delivered twenty-seven letters, in different handwritings, all urging her to abandon the fight.

Throughout the day telegrams kept arriving in which the same message was contained in condensed forms. There were fifty-four of these, and every paper-basket in the house brimmed to overflowing.

The parlour-maid had given notice, and Mrs. Sheridan's head was in a whirl. But her resolve had not weakened, when she turned off the gas at the meter on the second day of her persecution.

Lord Louis' minions gave her a rest that night, but she slept scarcely at all. Each moment she expected a violent assault on the knocker, or some fresh invention for her torment.

She rose unrefreshed and crossed to the dressing-table. A window immediately behind this piece of furniture commanded a view of a hoarding, where some new buildings were in course of construction.

During the night the length and breadth of this space had been placarded with notices which bore the words, in large type, "THE PRICE HAS BEEN PAID, DELIVER THE GOODS."

Mrs. Sheridan pulled down the blind with such violence that the spring broke.

Now it so happened that Sylvaine, who always hunted three days a week, attended, that morning, the same meet to which Lord Louis Lewis, a stranger in the neighbourhood, had come.

Of course, they were not acquainted with one another, but quite early in the proceedings Sylvaine, attracted by the perfect way he sat his horse, asked one of the pink-coated huntsmen the name of the new arrival.

"Lord Louis Lewis," he replied. "I fancy his people are from the West Country."

"Oh!" said Sylvaine. "Thank you."

So this was the man who was persecuting her mother.

A spirit of adventure seized her, and she considered a plan for turning the tables on the noble lord.

The opportunity came sooner than she expected.

It chanced that their horses had drawn together in a wild, all-out gallop across the moor. The rest of the field was far behind and they had come to a place where a pine wood ran at right angles to the line taken by the fox. Suddenly Sylvaine twisted her mare sharply through the gallery of trees, crying out as she did so: "Brute! I can't hold her!"

Lord Louis heard the cry, reined up, turned and

spurred after her. He could see her mare receding at a terrific pace until lost to view in a turn of the path.

Sylvaine was no sooner out of his sight than she pulled up, and springing from the saddle, flung herself, face downwards, on the turf.

Coming on the scene, Lord Louis dismounted, and holding his reins lightly in one hand, rolled her over with the other. Whereupon Sylvaine made a great pretence of being partially stunned. She raised herself to a sitting posture, then, greatly to his surprise, struck the reins out of his hand, and delivered a smart cut with her whip at his restless horse.

The animal was a thoroughbred, and resented such treatment. He flung up his heels, and made off as fast as his elegant legs could carry him.

Then Sylvaine looked at Lord Louis, and laughed maliciously.

"It will be a long walk home, Lord Louis Lewis," she said.

Lord Louis was not easily taken unawares. Although he had no idea at all why the young lady had acted in this extraordinary manner, he replied, with the utmost politeness:

"If that is so, I cannot be sufficiently grateful for a companion to accompany me."

"But I have a mare grazing in the clearing yonder."

"Then my responsibility is ended," he said. "And as you appear to have recovered from your self-imposed fall, I will wish you good day."

"You extraordinary man!" exclaimed Sylvaine. "Don't you want to know why I did it?"

"Only if it would be any satisfaction to you to tell me," he answered.

A little piqued by his imperturbability, she said:

"My name is Sylvaine Sheridan."

Lord Louis puckered his brow. For a moment the name suggested nothing, then it dawned on him in a flash. He made no outward sign, however, and only remarked:

"As you are likely to be home some hours before I shall, will you be so good as to ask your mother when she would find it convenient to deliver the chair?"

Whereupon Sylvaine subsided on the grass, and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks, and before very long he was laughing too.

"You really deserve to have it," she managed to say. "I couldn't believe any one would take a revenge in such good part. I am awfully sorry you will have to walk home."

Certainly she was a wonderfully attractive looking girl as she sat among the high grasses, her face bright with laughter. Lord Louis had a highly developed sense for things of beauty, animate or inanimate, and the picture she presented strongly appealed to that sense. Accordingly, he sat down on the grass by her side, and produced a sandwich case and a large silver flask.

"If you will consent to share a modest luncheon," he said, "I shall be more than rewarded for the loss of my mount."

And thereupon these two young people, who had only met a few minutes before, partook together of an al fresco meal unto the last crumb in the box, and the final drop of diluted claret in the flask.

"And now," said Sylvaine, when they had finished, "I want you to tell me why you are so absurd about that funny old chair."

Lord Louis lit a cigarette. "It is never absurd to desire a thing of beauty," he said.

Sylvaine seemed quite surprised. "Is it beautiful?" she asked. "I always thought it rather ugly and old-fashioned.

Lord Louis looked at her whimsically. She was a new type to him, this girl who lightly flouted the best workmanship of Chippendale. His own youth had been spent among beautiful furniture and pictures and people to whom knowledge and appreciation of these matters was a second nature. He wondered, vaguely, whether she was even aware of her own beauty.

"Please tell me why you want the chair so badly?" her voice cut in on his reflections.

"Because," he replied, "it is one of a set which my family has always valued very highly. They were made for an ancestor of mine, by Chippendale himself. There were thirteen in the set."

"What an odd number," said Sylvaine.

"You are right," he acknowledged. "The idea was my ancestor's and not without charm. The thirteenth chair, like the two carvers, has arms, and was designed to be placed at the right of number one,

where the head of the family sat. It is known as the Bride's Chair."

"The bride's chair?"

"Yes, and it was used when husband and wife were alone together."

"But why didn't they sit at each end of the table like other people?"

"My ancestor contended that husband and wife should not be separated even to the extent of a twelve foot table and a barrier of five chairs a side. He was singularly happily married. As a matter of fact, I do not believe that there has ever been an unhappy marriage in our family, and consequently the Bride's Chair has come in for a deal of wear."

Sylvaine reflected the smile he gave as he said this.

"It is a nice story," she nodded. "How did the chair come to be lost?"

"My father sent it away to be repaired, and the man disappeared, the chair with him. That was forty years ago — twelve years before I was born — and we have been looking for it ever since. You can imagine my satisfaction when I found it in the Parish Room the other day."

"And is it worth two hundred and fifty pounds to you?"

"Why, yes," he answered. "When the time comes I should wish my bride to occupy her rightful place."

"You are engaged, then?"

"Oh, no." He rose. "Shall I see if I can catch your mare?"

"I'll come too," said Sylvaine. "She won't be far off."

They came upon the mare grazing about a hundred yards away, and Lord Louis gave Sylvaine a hand up to the saddle.

"I say," she said, "I feel dreadfully ashamed of what I did."

"Not at all," he replied. "I expect, from your point of view, I richly deserved it."

"But I am ashamed, nevertheless, and I shall make amends by forcing mother to give it up. She will do things for me, you know."

He looked at the flushed and almost boyish face, with its absurd riot of brown curls under the hard felt hat, and thought what she had claimed was extremely probable.

"Thank you," he said. "You had better be off now, or people will be worrying as to what has become of you."

"And you?"

"I shall be all right. There is no one to worry in my case. *Au revoir!*" and with a wave of the hand, he strode away.

Sylvaine watched him go; then shook her reins and cantered off in the opposite direction.

Lord Louis was still some miles from his destination, when he caught the sound of galloping hoofs, and, looking round, saw Sylvaine approaching, leading his own horse by the bridle. He marked how perfectly she managed them as the two horses cleared a four-foot shale wall a little way down the valley.

"I had an awful job to catch him," she cried, "but I succeeded at last. Here! Catch hold!" slipping the bridle into his hand.

"This is very kind of you," said Lord Louis. "You heap coals of fire upon my head."

"It was the least I could do," she answered. "I say, there is a farm about a mile from here. Shall we see if they would give us some tea? It would be rather fun!"

Lord Louis thought it would be great fun — and it was. True, it would have been more considerate to the feelings of the excellent Mrs. Sheridan, if Sylvaine had gone straight home, and not lingered for an hour and a half over the delights of home-made bread and jam and yellow farmhouse cream, to say nothing of the pleasant companionship which made the minutes fly like seconds. Young folk are apt to forget the feelings of their elders in certain psychological moments. If it were not so there would probably be fewer marriages.

Seven o'clock had struck when they parted a hundred yards from Sylvaine's door. Only the horses had reason to complain of the length of the day.

"Tell Mrs. Sheridan," said Lord Louis, "I declare a truce for seven days."

"I will," said Sylvaine. Then —"Are you hunting on Thursday?"

"Of course," he replied. "I only wish they met tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," said she, "I am trying a horse for a friend of mine on the Downs."

peating over and over to herself something he had said during the ride home. It was not very much of a sentence. Something about being very careful, because so long as she was of the world no one else could ever matter. Rather a poor sentence when one comes to examine it, but it pleased her, and she was playing with the words when the dawn showed the window transoms in silhouette against the lowered blind.

After breakfast she went to the stable, saddled up, and rode away. It is nice to be alone when one knows it is not to be for long; besides, she wished to leave a clear field for Lord Louis' interview with her mother.

He came about an hour later, and was shown into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Sheridan greeted him politely, but without great cordiality.

"I have a suggestion to make in regard to the chair," he began.

"I may as well tell you," she cut in, "that I have no intention of allowing it to leave my family."

"I suggest you should allow your family to live with the chair," he answered.

Mrs. Sheridan did not understand, whereupon he made his meaning more clear. Her astonishment knew no bounds.

"But you have only known the child a week," she gasped.

"So long as your daughter is alive I shall marry no other woman," said Lord Louis, with youthful

vehemence. "It would be a pity if the Bride's Chair were never occupied."

"I hardly know what to say," she replied, but in less than half an hour she had said what he desired to hear, and had been soundly kissed, greatly to her scandalized delight.

On the time which followed it is not the intention of the writer to dwell. The two young people lived in a kingdom of their own making, and are entitled to have it to themselves.

There is one little scene, however, which might be lightly touched upon. It took place after a long day's hunting, when he and she were sitting together before the fire in the already described Sheridan drawing-room. They had exhausted their reminiscences of the day, and unconsciously Lord Louis' conversation drifted to other matters. He began to talk of many different places he had seen and loved — of books he had read, and pictures which delighted him. He planned how they should visit together the Prado in Spain to see the Velasquez portraits, and, maybe, the Uffizi Gallery, which he knew as well as his own right hand.

Sylvaine was very silent as he talked, and this encouraged him to proceed at greater length than he intended. He dilated on the marvels of the museum at Naples, and the mysteries of excavated Pompeii.

It was no high-browed dissertation designed to impress her, but just the rambling thoughts and reflections of a man to whom the great art treasures of all the ages were an appreciated inheritance.

"On our honeymoon we will go to all these places," he said. "You would like that, wouldn't you?"

Sylvaine answered doubtfully. "I think it would be much jollier at Minehead, with the Devon and Somersets. Do you really care for old books and pictures and things like that?"

"Why, yes," he said. "Don't you?"

"Not much," she replied. "I like pretty things, of course, when there are no horses or dogs about. I chose the paper and furniture for this room, you know."

"Did you?" he answered, feeling a little chilled, and soon after he bade her good-night.

The scene is submitted for what it is worth, and was soon forgotten in the excitement of preparing for the wedding.

Early presents had already begun to arrive, and dressmakers were busy with the needle.

Now this is a sad story, though it may be argued the pathos is somewhat long in coming. It came, nevertheless, and with a suddenness like laughter stopped with a bullet.

Three weeks before their wedding it happened. A stumble on a sharp descent — a girth insufficiently tightened — a saddle which heeled over and dropped its rider where an ugly sharp rock had waited cunningly on the hillside, down all the centuries.

Sylvaine came home on a hurdle, and there was very little feeling in any part of her body.

The specialist from London said her spine was injured and she would never walk again.

She was very brave, for she insisted on knowing everything, and when at last Lord Louis was admitted to her room, she told him he was not to worry. And he was brave about it too, although men are not so good at this kind of thing as women. He could not say very much, but he repeated the sentence he had made on the day of their engagement. She said it held good no longer, and he must find some one else to occupy the thirteenth chair, but in her heart she knew that what he had said was the thing of all others she desired to hear.

Lord Louis brought the chair and placed it by her bedside.

"It shall always remain there," he said, "in token that I keep my word."

Sylvaine sent back all the wedding gifts, which is a sad business for a girl of twenty. But then she always took her fences without turning a hair.

The night which should have been their wedding night she slept with her hand upon the arm of the Bride's Chair. And Lord Louis Lewis, in a distant part of the town, sat by an open window, and looked across the starlit Downs on which the beat of her horse's hoofs would never sound again.

. . . . . .

Sarah traced patterns with her finger-tip on the high glaze of the long table. Presently she said:

"That was twenty years ago, Uncle Louis?"

"Twenty years," he replied.

"And she — is still living?"

He nodded. "The Fates are not always very kind, Sarah."

"Poor thing," said Sarah. "Do you still see her?"

"Why, yes," he replied. "As often as she will let me — which is not very often."

"What does she say?"

Lord Louis smiled a little. "As to that," he said, "you and she have one topic in common."

"She wants you to get married," said Sarah, very quickly.

"All women are match-makers," he generalized.

"And you've refused?"

"My promise still holds good," he answered.

"Hasn't it been hard?"

"She has faced a harder problem without complaint."

Sarah was silent a moment — then she said:

"Are you still in love with each other?"

"Time alters our emotions," he replied, very thoughtfully. "I still admire her above all women."

Sarah rose and drew on her gloves.

"Thank you for telling me," she said. "I think you are both splendid — but it does seem rather a pity, doesn't it?"

As she moved towards the door she halted, and caressed the air where the thirteenth chair should have stood.

A few days later Lord Louis received a note say-

ing that Sylvaine would like to see him. He looked up a train, and started at once. He was shown into the drawing-room where first he had met Mrs. Sheridan. That good lady had long since joined the spirits, but the room was the same as in her time. The gondoliers and Italian maidens still grinned from their plaques, and the classic nudes still wrestled with steeds upon the mantelshelf. Only the aspidistras in the conservatory had withered, and no longer hurled defiance at the faded wallpaper. The trumpery vanities of the room had always been distasteful to him, and he never entered it without marvelling that it was here the early chapters of his life's romance had been enacted. He always tried to forget that Sylvaine herself had chosen those silly gauds and ugly flimsy chairs and tables. It seemed hard to adjust these surroundings with a woman who had the greatness to accept the cruellest blow the Fates could deal without a murmur.

Presently Sylvaine's cousin came in, and asked him to go upstairs. "But don't stop long," she said.

He mounted the stairs, and knocked gently.

"Well, Louis," said Sylvaine, "it's a long time since I sent for you." He stooped and kissed her forehead. "Sit down and tell me all about yourself."

He sat on the thirteenth chair, and spoke gently of such quiet matters as a sick room demands, but he felt she was not listening. Then she interrupted with —

"Louis, how old are you?"

"Forty-eight," he replied.

"And I've wasted twenty years for you. No, no," stopping his reply, "I want to say this. It would have been much better if you had broken your promise, Louis, really it would. But you mustn't forget that the promise breaks itself one day. You have been wonderfully constant, far more so than you would have been if I had been your wife."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I sometimes think my accident averted a tragedy. Every time we meet I feel it more strongly. You have changed so much more than I. Those outdoor days we had together, which were my whole life, were only an episode to you. The headlong gallop, the high jump, these were only a phase. The student and the connoisseur in you have taken the higher place. You would soon have found out the mistake if we had married, and that would have been harder to bear than this, you know."

"Sylvaine," he said, "it is unlike you to talk in this way."

"Why, don't you see," she answered, "the greatest consolation I have is the thought that you never did find out?"

Just then her cousin came in, and told him he had stayed as long as the doctor allowed.

As he was going Sylvaine said, "We had great times together, and you've been a great friend, Louis, and we have neither been disillusioned in the other. That is something to say after twenty years. Good-bye."

A fortnight later the death of Sylvaine Sheridan was announced in the obituary column of *The Times*.

It came as no shock to Lord Louis, but rather he felt, as she must have done, that this was the greatest kindness the Fates had shown her.

During the day a crate arrived at his house containing the Bride's Chair. Badger, the butler, always a man of method, saw at once that it belonged to the dining-room set, and, of his own initiative, placed it at the right hand of where his master sat.

Shortly after the funeral Lord Louis went abroad for three months, to refresh his memory of the Italian galleries. He was accompanied on the expedition by his friend, Mr. Russell Yorke.

It is not the intention to suggest that his leaving England had anything to do with a broken heart. His heart was not broken, for twenty years is a long time, and many a worse wound than the one he received has healed in less. Perhaps, too, he knew the words she had spoken at their last meeting were true, although he would have thought it a breach of honour to confess as much, even to himself. He had stood by his word very faithfully, under circumstances not always of the easiest. A being who can inspire love in one breast may well awaken it in another, which is a possibility generally discounted by a man's wife.

It would be a great untruth to pretend that Lord Louis' emotions were only to be aroused by the fine paste of an Oriental vase, the glow of Chinese lac-

quer, or the golden tints of an old master. He was a man like the rest of us, and not one of your determined bachelors who eat their solitary breakfasts in complete satisfaction of their own entity. Whereby the greater credit attaches to what he had done.

It was a particularly sunny day in June when he returned to his native city of Bristol. Badger, the butler, greeted him with deferential cordiality, and the news that Mrs. Sarah Milwood was waiting to welcome him. He had given her some lunch, he said, and she was to be located in the dining-room.

Consequently Lord Louis directed his footsteps thither before all else.

Sarah extended both hands.

"Uncle Louis, how lovely and brown you look," she cried. "I knew you would, and I've brought Jill over to see you."

The young lady in question rose from the chair which immediately adjoined Lord Louis' place at the table. The Bride's Chair, to be more explicit.

It may, of course, have been a coincidence that she was sitting there — it may have been prophetic. On the other hand, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Sarah said a few words to the butler while he was setting the covers. She was quite capable of doing so, and Badger was a man whose discretion could be absolutely relied upon in little matters of that kind.

Miss Jill didn't know one chair from another, until some time after, when Lord Louis told her the family tradition. He himself was a firm supporter of the

theory that her occupation of the Bride's Chair was prophetic of future events, and, after all, no one was in a better position to judge than he.

CHAPTER IX

THE THIRD ENCOUNTER

A DEALER'S life is full of disappointments — any of them will tell you that — and Simon Caleb's had been no exception to the rule. Of all the bitter disappointments which had come his way, not the least was that in connection with the strange old man he met on Dartmoor.

Caleb was visiting some of the remoter districts of Devon at the time, in search of Welsh dressers, lustre teapots, or any other odds and ends the unsophisticated cottagers might be prepared to sell for about one-third of their real value.

It was in a tiny house, just beyond the village of Mary Tavy, that he came upon the old man. Caleb had walked up the lane, and sensing that there was no one in the front room, had flattened his nose against the window-pane. To his astonishment, he saw the room was furnished with a remarkably fine claw and ball foot table and four Chippendale chairs of very rare design.

Caleb fairly gasped, and, in another moment, was rapping his stick against the door. It was opened by a quaint little old man, in a shabby pair of breeches and waistcoat. He wore a green baize apron with a white one over it. On his head was a skull cap, embroidered with forget-me-nots and scar-

let pimpernels. His sleeves were rolled up, showing a pair of hairy hands, and arms knotted and gnarled with toil. He had a simple, almost babyish face, and sported a short stubbly beard. He peered at Caleb, benignly, through a pair of pebble glasses, and asked him what he needed.

"I've had a long trudge," said Caleb, glibly, "and my throat is that dry, I came to beg a drink of water."

"Won't you take a drop of cider?" said the old man. "I was about to have one myself. Step inside and sit down, while I draw a jug," and he held open the door of his little sitting-room as he spoke.

Caleb was enchanted. If ever he had seen a soft thing here it was. While the old man was away, he feasted his eyes on the furniture.

"No doubt about it," he murmured to himself, "these are the goods."

When his host returned, bearing a jug and two blue china tankards, he casually remarked:

"You've some nice bits of furniture here."

"You like 'em?" said the old man, pouring out the cider.

"Quite nice," Caleb allowed, without too much enthusiasm.

"You know a bit about furniture, perhaps?" the old man asked.

"Yes, I know a bit."

"Would you take these pieces to be genuine?"

Caleb did not entirely approve of the turn the conversation was taking. It appeared as if the old

man might have some knowledge as to the value of his property, which would never do. Accordingly, he assumed a critical expression, and lied.

"They are effective enough pieces," he replied, "but they are certainly not genuine."

Then, intensely to his surprise, the old man clapped him upon the back, and cried:

"Well done, sir! You are perfectly right."

"Eh? Beg your pardon!" exclaimed Caleb.

"You are a smart man, sir," the other went on, "one of the smartest I ever run against."

"Eh?" repeated Caleb, still uncomprehending.

"I made every bit of it myself."

"You're a liar," broke forth from Caleb, in spite of himself. "You never made these pieces any more than I did."

The old man took this remark in the light of a pleasantry.

"'Tisn't everybody would have spotted it," he said. "Why, sometimes when I turns out a thing, I hardly know it from the original. Come along and see a bit I'm workin' on now." So saying, he bundled Caleb through the back door and into a large shed, in which was a carpenter's bench and a great assortment of broken-down pieces of furniture of different periods.

"These are all genuine," the old man rattled on, "and I uses them as models. There! Little Queen Anne table I'm makin'— see. When I've finished the joinery I polishes it up in the back room yonder and brings it down to the right colour. I use nought

but old wood —'tis that makes it hard to tell the difference — that, and my way of treating the surface. Lovely work! Keeps me happier nor any wife would. On'y thing that troubles me is that I mayn't be able to go on."

"How's that?" asked Caleb, who by this time had realized that he was in the presence of a veritable genius among wood-workers. "What's to prevent you goin' on?"

"Money," said the old man, sadly. "Wood and tools costs a lot, and I haven't much to spare."

"But you ought to be rich, being able to turn out stuff like this."

"I don't sell," said the other gravely. "I makes for my own pleasure. Maybe, here and there, a friend has a sample of my work — folks I can trust implicitly, d'y' see?"

It was then that Caleb made the mistake of his life. He introduced himself as a dealer in antiques of very high repute. He offered to supply the old craftsman with all the materials he wanted, and give him fifty per cent. on all sales. He asked for an option on the whole of his output.

"Stuff like yours," he wound up, "is good enough to deceive the Archbishop of Canterbury himself."

"Deceive?" roared the old man. "Understand me, and then get out of here. It is folks of your kidney as stops me from selling what I make — yes — because you'd be after taking people in with it. I'm an honest man, and, please God, I'll stay so. D'ye think I've so little respec' and rev'rence for those

great Masters, Chippendale and Sheraton, that I'd shame their memory by pretending my poor handiwork was theirs? I come to this place to get away from smooth-tongued robbers and sharks, like you — yes, so I did. So the sooner you clears out of this, the better."

And Caleb went.

Memory of that interview never failed to arouse the bitterest feelings in Simon Caleb's breast.

"If I'd have had that fellow workin' for me I'd have made me fortune," he declared. "I'd have sent stuff to Christie's, and no one would have been any the wiser."

That, of course, is a matter for doubt, for shrewd men assemble in those famous salesrooms. But there is no doubt whatever that Caleb would have tried.

. . . . . .

Mutual help being the essence of happy marriage, people who are engaged cannot begin the study of each other's requirements too soon.

Lord Louis Lewis was removing the peel from a Duchesse pear, balanced on the end of a fork; while his fiancée, Miss Jill Marston, sat opposite to him, in the dining-room of the Clarence Hotel, cracking walnuts, and placing the exquisitely-skinned quarters beside his plate. The last of the peel having gone, he cut the pear in four pieces, extracted the core, and proffered her the results.

"I have received an invitation to dine with a relative of yours on Saturday next," he remarked.

"Oh," said Jill. "Who?"

"The Duke of Bethincourt."

"Then I certainly shouldn't go. Beth is a horrid little beast."

Lord Louis smiled. "And yet," he murmured, "it is said that blood is thicker than water."

"He is only a second cousin twice removed," she returned. "I wouldn't be sorry if he were removed altogether."

"He wrote me a very charming letter."

"That's quite likely. It is also likely he will give you a very charming dinner, and more likely still he will borrow a hundred with the liqueurs."

"Dear me!" said Louis, "and is he like that?" Jill nodded emphatically. "Tell me the worst," he pleaded.

"I can't," she said, "because I'm glad to say I don't know it. I do know that he drinks too much, and that he ran through all his own money and most of his father's, who was a dear."

"Died a few weeks ago, didn't he?" queried Lord Louis.

"Yes, after selling the estate and nearly everything else to pay Beth's gambling debts."

"I wondered why the old Duke had taken that house in the Avenue. Wasn't there a room in their old place which Queen Anne was supposed to have occupied?"

Jill nodded over a mouthful of pear.

"Um! There was some furniture in it you'd have loved."

"Sold?" asked Lord Louis.

"Rather not. Uncle Jack had it put in a special room at the Avenue house."

"That being so, I am sorely tempted to accept your degenerate cousin's invitation. The Queen Anne room intrigues me."

"It is a lovely period," said Jill. "One of my dreams is to have a Queen Anne bedroom."

"For the future," said Lord Louis Lewis, "my chief ambition is to make your dreams come true.'

When people who are engaged begin to talk in that strain the wise man will remove and leave them to pursue its course alone.

Lord Louis accepted the invitation, and presented himself on the day and hour indicated.

The Duke of Bethincourt was twenty-eight years old, and the direct product of over breeding; which is quite as bad, if not worse, than no breeding at all. His face was colourless and cavernous; his eyes heavy-lidded and slow of movement. His hair was so smooth as to resemble some form of lacquer or japan. He had an irritating habit of polishing his finger nails on the lapel of his coat.

His greeting of Lord Louis was more than cordial.

"Delighted to welcome you, Lewis," he said, "and as you are marrying into the family, I hope we shall become fast friends."

Lord Louis thought it unlikely, but refrained from observing as much.

The dinner, an elaborate affair of many courses and many wines, began pleasantly enough. The Duke of Bethincourt, however, addressed himself to

the bottle with more energy than wisdom, and by the time the quails were served, his tongue was so loosened by alcohol that he began a series of amative reminiscences, reaped from his lurid past.

Finding the subject distasteful, Lord Louis intervened with some personal adventures in search of antiques.

The Duke enjoyed these very much, particularly one about Simon Caleb and Mr. Palliser, furniture dealers, of the city of Bristol, who had tried to swindle Lord Louis in the matter of the Cellini salt-cellar, to their own undoing.

"What a pair of crooks," he cried. "I suppose they cleared out — what?"

"No. Caleb continues his business in Hennigan Street," said Lord Louis.

By the time they had lighted cigars and returned to the smoking-room, Lord Louis was painfully aware that his host was intoxicated. He experienced the greatest difficulty in articulating words of more than two syllables. His conversation began to ramble through the glades of Eros, and he explained how many past indulgences were the cause of much present embarrassment, financial and otherwise.

"Th' ol' man lef' me jolly badly off," he declared. "If I get fif'een hun'ed a year after th' will's proved I shall b' lucky — dam' lucky. 'Fernal exec'tors taking a long time to wind up th' estate. Tol' me, t'day, be 'nuther four, five months — p'raps six. Tol' me mus' be 'conomical. I ask you! People won' wait — they dun a fell'r. Women worse than

men — mush worse. Jolly glad you're marryin' int' th' fam'ly! Jill's a goo' girl — a straight girl — strai' 's a die.'

Lord Louis frowned. "There are things, Bethincourt, too obvious to require endorsement," he said. "You will oblige me by making no further encomiums on my future wife."

"You miss th' point," continued the Duke, unconscious of the reproof. "What I mean's this — bein' one of the fam'ly, shan't mind comin' t' you when I'm in a hole."

Lord Louis rose and glanced at his watch. "Before I go," he said, "I should very much like to see the Queen Anne room."

"So you shall," said Bethincourt, struggling to his feet, "so you shall — if I can fin' th' infernal key."

"The key?"

"Room's locked — val'ble stuff. Old Queen Anne slep' in the' bed — she's dead now. I know where 'tis — on my chain. Come on!"

The Duke of Bethincourt made very heavy weather in traversing the hall, but he contrived to unlock the door, and invited Lord Louis to enter, with a perilous gesture.

In the room was a carved bed, a tallboys, a very delicate little chest of drawers and mirrors, four chairs, and a writing-table. There was nothing very remarkable about the pieces, they were merely well-made and well-proportioned examples of the period. The chief charm lay, of course, in their association with the departed Sovereign.

Lord Louis caressed the glowing surface of the little writing-table, and passed a loving hand over the front of the tallboys.

"The preservation of these pieces is wonderful," he remarked.

"My folk were crazy 'bout the stuff. Silly, when you come t' think of it. After all — wha's it 'mount to? A few bits and sticks — tha's all."

"They belonged to a Queen," said Lord Louis, coldly, "and as such demand our respect."

"Don't get it, then — not from me — som'ing better t' think 'bout." And he launched into a long recital of his financial woes. But Lord Louis was an unsympathetic audience, who offered neither practical nor verbal help.

"Tell you what 't is, Lewis," said the young man, pointing an accusing and unsteady fore-finger, "you're a miserly ol' devil — sorry t' 'ave to say 't, but tha's what you are."

"Bethincourt," Lord Louis replied, "you are doing less than justice to the traditions of your family."

"Go to th' deuce!" said the Duke, with an airy gesture.

Lord Louis moved towards the door. "Good-night," he said, "and thank you for showing me the Queen Anne suite. I can, at least, compliment you on that part of the entertainment."

"Look here!" said the Duke, sobering a trifle, "if you are so struck on the stuff, why not buy it?"

"You can hardly be serious," said Lord Louis,

The Duke explained that he was entirely serious. Furniture was nothing to him, and if Lord Louis cared to put up two thousand pounds, he could have it and be welcome.

Lord Louis considered the point with mixed feelings of excitement and contempt. Presently he said:

"I shall take no advantage of your offer tonight, as your condition may cause you to make suggestions you may regret later on. If, however, you are of the same mind tomorrow, I might be prepared to accept the proposal. Au revoir," and he let himself out of the house.

At eleven o'clock the following morning he was back again, having responded to a note from the Duke of Bethincourt.

"Yes, I am willing to sell," said the Duke. "I can see no other way. What did I tell you you could have the set for?"

"Two thousand," replied Lord Louis.

The Duke of Bethincourt laughed.

"I must have been far gone," he exclaimed. "You don't imagine I meant it? The stuff is worth double that."

"On the contrary," said Lord Louis, "as furniture, pure and simple, it is barely worth a quarter. I am willing to pay the extra fifteen hundred, however, on account of the historic interest."

"I might let it go at three thousand," said the Duke.

Lord Louis rose, and buttoned his glove. "Then you must seek another market," he said.

"What an impatient chap you are," declared the other. "There, there, sit down. To tell the truth, a couple of thousand would come in extremely useful just now. So if you'll give me your cheque I'll receipt it and send along the stuff when the legal matters of my pater's will have been settled."

"I don't quite follow you."

"It isn't in my power to let you have it before. The delay won't be over six months. Plenty of time for your wedding."

"Very well," said Lord Louis, "I will ring up my solicitor to come round and draw up a contract."

"But I suppose I can have the cheque now?"

Lord Louis raised his eyebrows. "I will give it you when the furniture is available," he answered.

The Duke of Bethincourt made a great fuss at this, but eventually consented.

"You are a tightfisted beggar," he said. "I was counting on that money to have a little flutter on the Grand National."

The solicitor appeared, the contract was drawn up, signed, and carried away to be stamped.

When his guest had gone the Duke of Bethincourt reviled the name of Lord Louis Lewis, and drank deeply to his downfall and future misery.

The week which followed surpassed all others in his experience for bad luck. Everything went wrong. He was dunned — he lost at cards — and had the ineffable anguish at the Grand National of watching the unbacked horse, he had so greatly favoured, win

at a canter. Wherefore his rage against Lord Louis knew no bounds.

About this time he made the acquaintance of a certain Mr. Edgar Salmon, who had made half a million sheep farming in Australia. It was murmured abroad that this gentleman's methods of doing business were not always guided by the strictest principles of honesty. He spoke the English tongue with the purest Australian accent.

To borrow his own phrase, he was "leounging areound on the look eout for a few bits of first-class stuff" for the place he was building at Brisbane.

It flattered him greatly to know a duke, even though rather a degenerate example of the species, and he did not mind spending a bit of money for the sake of the cachet given to his vulgar dinner parties by Bethincourt's presence.

It was after one of these affairs, the rest of the guests having gone, that the Duke confided the story of his deal with Lord Louis.

"'Tss!" said Mr. Salmon. "Why didn't you let me know? I'd have put down three thousand for that stuff and not minded waiting for it."

The Duke of Bethincourt declared that such luck as his was more than flesh and blood could endure.

"Well," said Mr. Salmon, "he hasn't got the stuff — and you haven't been paid. What's wrong with turning the deal over to me?"

"Can't be done," wailed the Duke. "I've signed a contract."

"Never put your name to paper," said Mr. Sal-

mon, and recounted several anecdotes in support of the statement.

The Duke of Bethincourt heartily applauded his friend's business acumen, and invited him to stroll round and have a look at the Queen Anne set. The invitation was readily accepted.

Mr. Salmon, as a connoisseur, lacked several essentials. He had no taste of any kind, but it pleased him to pay high prices for what he bought, for the pleasure of boasting about it afterwards. He thought it would be very fine for a Brisbane sheep raiser to sleep in a bed sometime occupied by a queen, and to keep his offensive neckwear in a chest of drawers where the lavender scented garments of a sovereign had reposed.

"I am pretty sick about missing this chance, Bethincourt," he said.

"So am I," said the Duke.

"Seems a pity we can't come to some arrangement about it. Let's have a look at that contract." The paper was produced and examined. "H'm! He's pinned you deown all right." He turned his eyes covetously towards the furniture, then suddenly slapped his thigh.

"I say, Bethincourt," he exclaimed, "I've got a notion!"

Briefly the notion was this. Why shouldn't Bethincourt raise a duplicate set for Lord Louis. He'd only seen the originals once, and, after all, there was nothing very unusual about them. There must be plenty of similar pieces knocking about, if one

took the trouble to look for them. He (Mr. Salmon) would plank down three thousand pounds for the set, then and there, and not mind waiting for delivery.

To the Duke's credit it should be stated that he did not accept the proposal without demur. Probably he would have refused outright but for Mr. Salmon's masterly tact. With a wealth of oratory, and appropriate gestures with his cheque-book, he denounced the meanness of Lord Louis. Whereby the Duke of Bethincourt fell from his grace and became a partner to a fraud.

"He'll never suspect," declared Mr. Salmon. "You'll show him the duplicate set in this room, and in the same positions in which he saw the originals. There's not a scrap of risk — and that's where the advantage of your name comes in." A remark which caused even the Duke of Bethincourt to blush. He forgot his scruples, however, when Mr. Salmon's fat cheque had been tucked into his pocket-book.

He awoke the next morning with a feeling of great uneasiness.

"I've let myself in for it," he mused, rubbing his finger-nails on the front of his silk pyjamas, "but where the deuce I am to find duplicates I don't pretend to know."

At breakfast an idea came to him. He remembered the tale Lord Louis had told about Simon Caleb.

"That fellow bears my lord a grudge," he said.

An hour later he entered Mr. Caleb's shop in Hennigan Street.

"Are you Mr. Simon Caleb?" he asked of a fusty-looking old man, who was winding up a grandfather clock.

The old man snuffled, and said he was.

"You have been mentioned to me as knowing all about furniture," proceeded the Duke. "Now I have six or seven pieces of Queen Anne, which I want duplicated."

Mr. Caleb blew his nose. "I have no facilities for making furniture," he said.

"You misunderstand me. I want some genuine pieces — exact replicas of the ones I have."

"Might be managed," grunted Caleb. "Can I see the stuff?"

"Certainly. If you are free we can go at once. I have a car outside."

On the drive up Caleb asked the name of his patron.

"I am the Duke of Bethincourt," replied the other.

"Oh!" said Caleb. "Is it the Queen Anne set you want duplicated, then?"

"Yes," replied the Duke, with a start. "How did you know?"

"Thought it might be," said Caleb, laconically.

Together they entered the house. The Duke of Bethincourt produced his keys and admitted Caleb to the Queen Anne room.

"Here we are," he said.

Simon Caleb stuck his hands in his pockets, and

chanting a tuneless air, wandered round. He peered at the chairs, the bed, and other appointments of the room. Sometimes he pushed his glasses to his forehead, and scrutinized some detail at a range of about one inch. During the whole examination he made no remark. Then he took off his glasses, wiped them, put them on again, blew his nose, and sat down on the bed.

"Well?" said the Duke, who found the ordeal a little trying to his nerves. "Can you get me some replicas?"

Simon Caleb whistled a scale of eight notes up and down again. Then he said:

"No, your Grace, I can't, and what's more, no one can."

"You surely don't mean that," gasped the Duke. "There's nothing out of the ordinary about these pieces."

"Yes, there is," said Caleb. "No end of little things you'd never find in another set. It was made by one man, this was, and he had his own ideas in the way of mouldings and what not. Look at the back slats of those chairs. Different from any I've ever seen. That tallboys, too! See the proportion? Never find another like it, and my fee is thirty shillings."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the Duke, "but this is serious. It is absolutely essential I should find a duplicate set. Can't you suggest a way of helping me?"

Caleb's shrewd little eyes narrowed. "Not being

in your Grace's confidence," he replied, "I can add nothing to what I have said. I think I mentioned what my fee was."

He rose as if to go.

"One moment," said the Duke. "It is like this, Mr. Caleb. In an ill-advised moment, a few days ago, I agreed to sell this set. I have since found out, under the terms of my late father's will, I have no power to do so. I am faced with the awkward problem of having to return the money, which I regret to say I have already spent, or deliver the furniture. It seems as if I shall be obliged to do the latter, in which case I must have a duplicate set so as to keep my father's executors in ignorance. You will, of course, respect my confidence."

Simon Caleb assumed an air of the utmost piety. "I would rather not be mixed up in an affair of this kind," he said. "My reputation —"

But the Duke did not allow him to finish the sentence.

"You can cut that out, Mr. Caleb," he said. "I know all about your reputation from Lord Louis Lewis."

Simon Caleb started. "Oh, you do!" he exclaimed. "I suppose it isn't him that's bought the stuff, is it?"

"Yes it is," came the reply.

"Then," said Caleb, "if you think I'm going to help him to get the goods you have made a big mistake. Good-morning," and he laid his hand on the door knob.

"Hold on!" said the Duke of Bethincourt. "Suppose I tell you I mean to keep the genuine set myself, and let him have the spurious one? Doesn't that appeal to you?"

Simon Caleb scratched himself behind the ear, and smiled.

"I wouldn't mind putting one over on Lord Louis Lewis," he said, "and I'm not above confessing as much."

"That's the spirit," said the Duke, slapping him heartily on the back.

"It would have to be a very clever fake, your Grace," went on Caleb. "I wonder if I could get it done?" His thoughts seemed far away. Suddenly he darted forward and looked at the brass fittings to the tallboys and dressing-table.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "that's lucky! I can get plenty of genuine ones like these. If the old man would tackle the job—" He halted, then said abruptly, "I'll let you know in a few days. If it comes off I shall want forty per cent. of what Lord Louis has paid you."

"To be stricty honest," said the Duke, "he hasn't paid me yet — and he won't until the stuff is delivered."

"I see," said Caleb, very slowly. "Then you were out to scalp him all the time?"

The Duke nodded. "He's an unpleasant fellow, Mr. Caleb."

"How much is he going to pay?"

"Two thousand. Here's the contract." He produced it as he spoke.

"Good enough," said Caleb. "Then you'll pay me eight hundred pounds when you get his cheque."

"And for that you will —"

"I'll provide the duplicate set, if any man alive can do it."

Thereupon they shook hands, and Caleb, with a staccato little bow, withdrew.

As he shuffled homewards his thoughts were far away in distant Dartmoor. Not in that part where Princetown prison rears its granite wall as a warning to wrong-doers, but to a quieter recess, set back from the main road, above the little hamlet of Mary Tavy.

"If I could only hit on a way to make him do it," Caleb muttered to himself. "There must be a way. But what are you to do with a man who ain't to be tempted by money? I wonder —"

A vague idea began to take shape in his brain. The old wood-worker had confessed that occasionally he did jobs for friends, or people he could trust.

"Thing 'ud be to find some one he would trust. Some one of high standing, who'd bamboozle him into taking on the job."

It might almost have been regarded as the working of Fate, that at this point of his reflections he should have observed the person of Mr. Palliser, mooching along on the opposite side of the road.

Caleb had not seen his late partner since their disastrous venture with the Cellini salt-cellar, the

failure of which he laid at Palliser's door. Nevertheless, the ingenuity of the man was remarkable.

Caleb eyed the shabby figure as it proceeded, a little ahead of him, in the same direction. Palliser was evidently down on his luck. The idea of further association with the man was most distasteful to Caleb, but he was bound to confess that he knew of no one more likely to succeed with the old craftsman of Dartmoor.

Acting on the impulse, then, Caleb whistled twice. It was an impertinent sort of whistle — the kind one employs to attract the attention of a low-bred dog.

Palliser stopped and turned round.

"Bless my soul," he said, "Simon Caleb!"

Caleb adopted a very high hand. "If you walk round to the shop, my man," he said, "I might be able to put a bit of work in your way. But you can keep to the other side of the road, as I'm particular who I'm seen walking with."

Mr. Palliser had his pride; also, what is more valuable, an understanding of the human mind. He knew that Caleb would not have addressed him unless he wanted something pretty badly. Accordingly he pulled his hat over one eye, looked Caleb up and down, contemptuously, and sauntered off in the opposite direction.

In matters of diplomacy Caleb was no match for his late partner. Palliser had gone barely twenty paces before the crook of Caleb's stick arrested further progress.

"Don't be touchy," said Caleb. "I was having a

bit o' fun, that's all. It'll pay you to come round to the shop."

Palliser had had every intention of doing so, but he demurred not a little, before consenting.

"Very well," he said, "but I hope you are not goin' to waste my time."

A few minutes later they foregathered in Caleb's parlour.

"We've talked over one or two little deals in here, Simon," said Palliser, reminiscently.

"We 'ave," returned Caleb, "and if you want me to keep my temper you won't remind me of it. The question is do you think you could look like a gentleman?" Then, observing a hot retort on the tip of the other's tongue, he went on hastily, "I believe you could. Clean shaven, with a good suit of clothes, you'd pass as a gentleman in any company."

Palliser did not reply, but he struck an attitude on the hearthrug, which an earl would have found hard to outrival.

"It is a delicate undertaking," proceeded Caleb, "and I'm not above admitting that some people would say it was sailing a bit close to the wind."

"You wouldn't be in it if it wasn't," observed Mr. Palliser.

Caleb ignored the interruption, and, without mentioning Lord Louis' name, recounted what had taken place at his interview with the Duke of Bethincourt.

"But where'll you get the stuff copied, Simon?" said Palliser. "Modern imitations don't fool a blind man."

"That's where you come in," said Caleb. "I never told you about the old chap on Dartmoor, did I? Then I'll tell you now." And he did. "Go down to Dartmoor," he concluded, "get to know the old chap. Palm yourself off as a gentleman. Might not be a bad plan to put a handle to your name — Sir John Palliser sounds good. Win his confidence, see? Get him to copy the stuff. You can do it."

Palliser digested the plan in silence, then said:

"Who is the fellow these fakes are to be planted on?"

"That I don't know," replied Caleb, thinking it inadvisable to mention Lord Louis' name. "But it doesn't matter to us, does it?"

"No, but I was just thinkin'," said Palliser, "if b' any chance it had 'appened to be Lord Louis, I should stand off."

Caleb blew his nose. "It's hardly likely to be," he said, brazenly. "Anyway, I don't see what difference it 'ud make."

"We've had two goes at Lord Louis," said Palliser, "and I don't seem to recall any particular success in either of 'em. My nerves is gone where he's concerned. I give him best, Caleb so I tell you."

"That's not like you, Palliser."

"P'raps not. But, anyway, I'm not such a fool as to tackle a third encounter, if I can help it."

"Well, we needn't waste time talkin' about that," said Caleb. "Will you do the job?"

"On terms," replied Palliser.

Mr. Palliser was never shy where terms were concerned, and he struck a hard bargain. He was to have four new suits, shoes, hats, socks, and all the other impedimenta of a knight on a holiday. Five and twenty pounds for the week he proposed to spend on Dartmoor. Travelling and hotel expenses. If he succeeded in inducing the old man to do the work he was to receive five pounds a week until the furniture was delivered, and a final sweetener of twenty-five per cent. on Caleb's profits.

That evening Caleb consulted with the Duke of Bethincourt, who would have agreed to anything to extricate himself from the difficult predicament.

Mr. Palliser placed an order for four suits with the best tailor in Bristol, and made innumerable purchases at hatters, hosiers and bootmakers.

The Duke of Bethincourt received some fairly staggering accounts for the decking out of Mr. Palliser's person, which, one regrets to state, are still unpaid.

While his clothes were being made Palliser spent what leisure was left him, after the barbers and manicurists had had their way, in studying the habits of the upper ten. He acquired a walk and a manner of swinging his cane only to be observed in the highest circles.

By a stroke of luck he came upon a copy of Stevenson's "New Arabian Nights," and did his best to emulate the polished address of that cream of gentlemen, Prince Florizel of Bohemia.

At last the day arrived when, with a pile of elegant luggage, he entered a first class compartment of the Devonshire express.

Caleb, who had come to see him off, could not refrain from expressing admiration at the picture of travelling nobility Mr. Palliser presented.

"You look Sir John Palliser to the life," he exclaimed.

"Haven't made up my mind to take that name," said Palliser. "I may think of something a bit more classy."

During the journey Palliser solved the problem of his future identity. Being alone in the carriage, he threw back his head and laughed. The very thing! He would borrow, for the nonce, the august name and title of Lord Louis Lewis.

In the past he had worked for that nobleman, and had had endless opportunities for studying his charming manners. He recalled Lord Louis' quiet way of dealing with all emergencies — his unfailing good humour — his gracious bearing towards those on the lower rungs of the social ladder. A hundred details crowded on Palliser's memory, and he determined that his impersonation should lend lustre to the original.

Accordingly he inscribed a new set of labels, which he tied to his luggage while waiting for the Lydford train at Oakhampton.

A few curious passengers read the labels, and it was gratifying to observe their looks as they watched

the pseudo Lord Louis lighting cigarettes and throwing them away half-smoked, or playing imaginary golf with his silver-mounted malacca.

Pallser alighted at Lydford, and hired a fly to convey him to the village of Mary Tavy.

He was much distressed to find there was only a small inn, for he had looked forward to putting up at an expensive hotel. However, he bade the coachman carry his traps within.

The proprietor, a simple-minded Devonian, was very effusive to his guest, and apologized for the humbleness of his entertainment.

Palliser inspected his room with kindly tolerance.

"It will serve," he was pleased to remark. "I perceive the sheets is passably clean, and an old campaigner, like what I am, can put up with a bit o' discomfort once in a way."

A little parlour was set aside for his use, and within half an hour he was seated before a dish of delicious troutlets and a pigeon, which had fallen to mine host's muzzle-loader.

He addressed the landlord's daughter, who attended to his wants, by the title of "My good girl," or "My dear young miss."

In order to suggest an aura of gracious birth he ordered a bottle of "Chateau Icame," but on learning neither that particular vintage, nor any other, was obtainable, he contented his lordly palate with a pint of half-and-half.

When he had finished, he announced the intention

of taking a liqueur in the bar, and gave his host time to spread the tidings of this great condescension before putting in an appearance.

Giving the assembled company a very good-evening, he graciously called for a round of drinks. Thereafter he made himself most agreeable, and recounted many anecdotes, suitable to the intelligence of his audience.

In the intervals between story-telling, he contrived to find out the names and vocations of every one present, including some who were not. Thus he learned that every one in Mary Tavy, with the exception of a certain Mr. Higgery, was either engaged in tending the soil, or those beasts which graze upon it.

He put a question as to Mr. Higgery's employment, and from the answer it appeared that this gentleman spent his time in making chairs and tables. Why? No one could tell. He never sold anything. Perhaps he was a bit strange in the head.

"Takes a wunnerful pride in his work," said mine host. "But the poor old chap's a bit low-spirited, these days. Told me he could scarce afford to buy wood any more. Mus' be purty short, I think. Used to be in here most every night, but now 't is only of a Wednesday or Saturday us ever sees 'un."

"It is Wednesday night, today," said Palliser.

"Dessay as you'll see 'un, then."

Sure enough, a little later on, Mr. Higgery put in an appearance, and was presented to the spurious Lord Louis with all ceremony.

Palliser was a little cold in his greeting — such

coldness as a person of substance should affect when speaking with inferiors — and when Mr. Higgery happened to address him, while he was conversing with Ebenezer Hannaford, pony owner, he remarked, "Wotsay, my good man?" in quite a corrective tone.

It was plain that Mr. Higgery, no less than the others, was impressed by the personality of Mr. Palliser and desired to present himself in attractive colours.

He mentioned his own poor skill as a craftsman, and begged the nobleman, should he happen to be passing, to step into the cottage and have a look round.

"I'll see about it, my good Higgery," said Palliser, "and I can't say fairer than that."

For two days Palliser, with consummate tact, made no effort to better his acquaintance with the old man. On the morning of the third they chanced to meet, and Mr. Higgery raised his hat in response to a curt salutation from the silver-mounted malacca.

"And how do we find ourselves this morning, Mr. Higgery?" inquired Palliser.

"A bit down, y'lordship, thanking you kindly. 'Tis the trouble of a small purse and the high prices of wood and tools."

"I perceived you was not yourself," said Palliser. "But don't take on, there's always a silver lining before dawn."

They conversed in this strain for a few minutes, and Mr. Higgery repeated his invitation of before.

"Well, I don't mind havin' a look, if your domicile

isn't too far off," said Palliser, very graciously. "But I must confess to a feeling of lassytood and my feet ache something crool."

All excitement, the old man ushered his famous guest into his humble abode. Palliser managed everything in a masterly fashion, and acted the lord to his own complete satisfaction. It is true he made one or two little slips: as, for instance, his rejoinder when Higgery showed him an exquisite little spider-leg table, and claimed to have made it.

"Yes, did it all myself," said the old man, with justifiable pride. To which Palliser replied, "Go on!" An expression which it is doubtful Lord Louis would have employed.

"Well, my good Higgery," he allowed, when he had seen everything, "there's no doubt at all you can turn out delectable furniture. I hope and pray you are never tempted to pass these things off as bein' genuine."

This sentiment made an immediate appeal to Mr. Higgery, who condemned furniture fraud as the vilest of offences.

Palliser heartily agreed, and spoke feelingly on the beauty of honesty, which, he declared, was dearer to his soul than any other virtue.

They parted on the best of good terms, and met again at the bar, during the evening. Palliser invited Mr. Higgery to take a glass of something in the privacy of his parlour.

"I've been thinking things over," he said, "and

wondering if you would care to do a piece of work for me."

Mr. Higgery listened attentively while Palliser told a story of a beautiful Queen Anne suite of furniture in his possession. It appeared that his brother, Lord Archibald Marmaduke Lewis, was to be wed, in six months' time, and how, in view of the said Archibald's great love for the Queen Anne suite, he (Palliser) had conceived the idea of having it duplicated as a wedding gift. Now would Mr. Higgery care to take on the job?

Mr. Higgery could hardly speak from excitement. He protested that nothing in the world would give him greater satisfaction.

And so it was arranged. The original set, he was to copy, would be sent down during the forthcoming week. The wood and any other materials he required would be paid for, and he was to receive one hundred pounds' remuneration when the work was done.

"But you'll have to keep your nose to the grindstone, old son — I mean, my good Higgery," said Palliser, by way of conclusion, "because the stuff must be finished in time for the wedding."

Mr. Higgery called heaven to witness that he would work day and night, rather than disappoint his noble patron.

Then Palliser wrote to Caleb — and Caleb congratulated Palliser. The genuine Queen Anne set was dispatched to Dartmoor. Old Mr. Higgery rolled up his sleeves and got to work. The Duke of Bethin-

court breathed freely for the first time for many days — and the pseudo Lord Louis Lewis returned to Bristol, covered with glory and four new suits, to enjoy six months' idleness with five pounds a week in his pocket and the prospect of a fat commission when the completed copies were delivered.

We now approach a point in this narrative which owes so much to chance that one hesitates to set it down.

It came about in the simplest manner, three months after the foregoing scene.

Lord Louis' fiancée, Miss Jill Marston, had to pay a duty visit to a relative in Scotland.

Being at a loose end, it occurred to Lord Louis that a week's motor tour through Devon would be a pleasant way of killing the time till her return.

Accompanied by the friend of his pre-engagement days, Mr. Russell Yorke, they covered many a highway and byway of that delightful country.

One day, as they were passing over Dartmoor, Lord Louis observed that his engine was running very hot. Stopping the car, he found that the water in the radiator had reached a low level.

The roof of a cottage showed at the end of a short lane, near by, and together they strolled thither to beg a pailful from the well.

An agreeable old man opened the door and asked them to step into the hall while he went in search of their needs. There was a half open door a little to the right of where they stood, through which a part of a Queen Anne tallboys was visible.

"That's a good piece," said Lord Louis, and, when the old man returned with a brimming can, he asked permission to have a look at it. Readily acquiescing, the old man led them into the room.

"Beautiful!" said Lord Louis.

"A fine old piece!" said Mr. Yorke.

Following his usual custom, Mr. Higgery hastened to disabuse their minds on the point of the tallboys' antiquity.

"You can see for yourselves, gentlemen," he concluded, "the polish is hardly dry."

Lord Louis and Mr. Yorke were amazed.

"If this is indeed your work," said the former, "you are the finest cabinet-maker of the age. It is easily the best reproduction I have ever seen."

The old man's face saddened. "Ah, sir," he replied, "Chippendale was the finest cabinet-maker of his age, and Sheraton of his; but they went beyond that, they had the Idea. I can use my tools as well as either of 'em, better maybe, for 't is a subtle thing to give a semblance of age to a new piece, but I haven't got the idea, and never had. If the imagination had gone with the craft King George might have seen his period in furniture as well as any of the others."

They stayed talking for some little while, the old man confiding why he never worked for the trade. He told them the piece they had seen was part of a commission he was executing for a very high-born gentleman he could absolutely trust. Lord Louis would have liked to have seen more, but Mr. Higgery

did not invite him into the workshop, where the genuine Queen Anne set was reposing, because he doubted whether his employer would approve. He insisted on walking with them as far the car, so as to bring back the empty can. Then Mr. Yorke and Lord Louis shook hands with him very heartily and drove away.

Presently Mr. Yorke said, "Wonderful work!"

And Lord Louis replied, "Astounding!"

"I am ashamed to confess," said the first speaker, "that I left a finger-mark on the wet polish of that tallboys. I simply hadn't the courage to own up."

Lord Louis smiled. "I doubt whether I should have had," he admitted. "Did it show much?"

"Fortunately not. It was on the narrow edge of the second drawer. The part which closes inside."

"It is curious," said Lord Louis, "but, to the best of my recollection, that tallboys is identical with the one I am buying from Bethincourt."

"Really!" said Mr. Yorke, "but there is not a great deal of variation in the designs. I wonder who he is making the copies for."

Three months later Simon Caleb, accompanied by Mr. Palliser, called on the Duke of Bethincourt.

The legalities in connection with the old Duke's will had been settled, with results disappointing to a young man of extravagant tastes. The three thousand pounds from Mr. Salmon had long since been dissipated, and the Duke of Bethincourt was quite looking forward to the margin of Lord Louis' cheque, which would be left him after settling up with Caleb.

Up to this point Caleb had paid for everything. Palliser's five pounds a week, Mr. Higgery's fee and all the materials. The only score the Duke had settled was Palliser's original twenty-five pounds. Caleb had protested a bit at first, but his hold on the Duke was a fairly good one, and he had no real objection to laying out his capital in so excellent an investment.

The following figures indicate the future division of Lord Louis' cheque for two thousand pounds:

The Duke of Bethincourt (after paying Caleb 40%)		£1,200
Caleb (after paying all expenses)		390
Palliser (twenty-six weeks at £5 a week)	£130	
(25% on Caleb's profits)	130	
		£260
Higgery (whose beautiful work made the above profits available)		100
Materials, etc.		50
		£2,000

This simple sum shows how, with a little business acumen, money is easily come by.

"Everything is ready, your Grace," said Caleb. "Mr. Palliser returned from Dartmoor yesterday, and will tell you the work is most satisfactory. Higgery has received his money, and we can take the stuff away as soon as you wish."

"Excellent," said the Duke.

"It will have to come back in two journeys," said Palliser, "because the motor lorry will only hold half. I didn't like to go to furniture people for a bigger one, in case they might talk. Question is, which lot you want back first?"

"The reproductions," replied the Duke. "We can then get our client round to see them, and pack them off before the other lot comes in."

Three days later Mr. Higgery's reproductions were arranged in the same order as the originals, when Lord Louis had first seen them.

The Duke of Bethincourt was delighted.

"They are marvellous!" he exclaimed. "I will let our client know that he can have them at once. You, Mr. Palliser, might return to Dartmoor, tomorrow, to superintend the loading of the genuine set. Just as soon as I have received the cheque I will send you yours, Mr. Caleb. I congratulate you both very heartily. Ours has been a most pleasant association, and I hope we shall meet in business again."

In response to a letter from the Duke of Bethincourt, Lord Louis drove to the Avenue early next morning. He instructed his chauffeur to bring up the large luggage car, and to take the gardener with him to help pack the furniture.

The Duke of Bethincourt met him in the Queen Anne room, and spoke feelingly about his sorrow at parting with the set. Lord Louis paid the cheque, pocketed his receipt, and drove away, the larger car, containing the furniture, following behind.

Arrived home, he had all the pieces placed in a small room on the ground floor, which had been cleared for their reception. When this was done he lit a cigarette, feasted his eyes on his new acquisition, and felt good.

He was so employed when Mr. Russell Yorke put in an appearance and joined in the examination. He expressed the greatest admiration, and pulled out the drawers of the writing-table, and generally had a field day among the different pieces. Indeed, had it not been for his irritating habit of fussing about with things, it is probable this story would never have been told.

He was prying into the second drawer of the tallboys, when he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"This is odd," he said. "You remember my telling you I had made a finger-mark on that tallboys the old fellow on Dartmoor showed to us?"

"Well?" said Lord Louis.

"There is a mark in exactly the same place on this one."

Lord Louis crossed and examined the spot where his friend was pointing.

"How very curious," he said, and a puzzled expression came over his face. "Yorke, would you oblige me by wetting your thumb, rubbing it on your boot, and making an imprint on this piece of paper?"

When this was done Lord Louis compared the two carefully. Then he straightened up and looked very serious.

"That young blackguard has swindled me," he

observed. "I have paid two thousand pounds for an imitation set."

Mr. Yorke whistled. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I am going to Dartmoor to have a little conversation with our old friend," he replied. "I shouldn't wonder if there is trouble ahead for some one, before very long."

Lord Louis Lewis' Sheffield Simplex entered the village of Mary Tavy, and drew up before Mr. Higgery's door at four forty-five, the same afternoon, having accomplished the distance in something approaching a record time.

Receiving no answer to his knock, he walked round to the back of the house. Across the yard stood a barn, with wide open doors, into which Lord Louis stepped. He had hardly crossed the threshold when he caught sight of something which caused him to catch his breath violently. Arranged along one wall of the barn was the genuine set of Queen Anne furniture.

He was moving forward when he heard the sound of a step behind him, and turning round saw the old man.

"Eh! Why, if it isn't the gentleman who was down here last spring!" exclaimed Mr. Higgery.

"Sir!" said Lord Louis, coldly. "I should be glad of some private conversation with you."

"Come on, then," said Higgery. "My work's done. We'll step into the house."

They had entered the little sitting-room before Lord Louis spoke again.

"Last time I was here, Mr. Higgery," he said (for the old man had mentioned his name as they crossed the yard), "you assured me you were an honest man."

"And so I am. What do you mean?" demanded Higgery, with some heat.

"You said you were copying a set of furniture for a titled gentleman. Will you be good enough to tell me his name."

"Certain'y. There's no secret about it. His name's Lord Louis Lewis."

"Ha! Then you knew these imitations were coming to me."

"Be you Lord Archibald Marmaduke Lewis, then?"

"I am Lord Louis Lewis."

"That you're not!" exclaimed Higgery, "for 'twas with Lord Louis I made the arrangements."

"Come, come, sir!" said Lord Louis, sharply, "this is nonsense. I have never done business with you, directly or indirectly. Please be good enough to explain what you are talking about."

"I will," replied Higgery. "No man shall take away my character." And he launched into a description of how he had met the spurious Lord Louis and consented to work for him, because he was a nobleman, and a person to be trusted.

"I am afraid," said Lord Louis, "you have been

shamelessly imposed upon. If you will listen to me I will explain how." Systematically he reconstructed the details of the swindle, concluding with "So you see this degenerate young Duke has merely used you as a tool. He never intended the genuine set should come to me, probably meaning to sell it again elsewhere."

Old Mr. Higgery shook with indignation. "Sir," he said, "if your words are true, it is the angriest man alive you see before you. You shall have your chance of proving them, for Lord Louis himself is coming here tonight to see the genuine set packed in the van for tomorrow's journey."

"Then, with your permission, I will wait here till he arrives."

It was a quarter to six when the sound of Mr. Palliser's footsteps was heard in the lane, followed immediately by a jaunty knock at the door.

Mr. Higgery admitted him with every show of respect, and invited him to enter the parlour. A gentleman was sitting there, who rose as Palliser came in. The pink light of the falling sun fell on his face.

"Good heavens, it's Palliser!" exclaimed Lord Louis.

Palliser turned white as a sheet. "Lord Louis Lewis!" he gasped.

That was sufficient for Mr. Higgery. With a bound he seized Palliser by the throat and flung him sideways against the table. Under the shock the table collapsed, and a pot of geraniums crashed to the floor beside the struggling pair. Mr. Higgery's

disengaged hand came into contact with the main stem of the plant. He gripped it and brought down the mass of earth and roots into Palliser's open mouth. Then Lord Louis intervened and wrenched the combatants apart.

"Come, come," he said, "let us discuss this matter temperately." Palliser rose from the floor, spitting out mould and trying to extricate a large piece from his eye.

"My lord," said he, "how did you come to be mixed up in this affair? When Caleb asked me to take a hand he swore solemn you had nothing to do with it."

"You were not aware these imitations were for me?"

"I swear I wasn't," said Palliser, with so much conviction that to disbelieve him was impossible.

"Then why," demanded Lord Louis, "did you masquerade under my name?"

Palliser shuffled uneasily. "He wouldn't work for the trade," jerking a thumb towards the indignant Mr. Higgery, "and as I was using your lordship's manner I made so free as to borrow the title as well."

Lord Louis concealed a smile. "The penalty for that offence is very severe, Mr. Palliser," he said.

"Your lordship is always generous," he faltered.

"Silence!" said Lord Louis. "Do not speak again unless I address you. I understand a van is calling here tonight for the genuine set, which is to return to Bristol tomorrow." Palliser nodded. "Then, Mr. Higgery, will you please superintend

the loading up and let me know, at the Inn, what time they propose to start in the morning. Palliser will come with me. Good-night, Mr. Higgery, and I think I can promise you your wonderful work shall deceive no one it was intended to."

Taking Palliser's arm, he led him to the waiting automobile, which was concealed further up the lane.

As they drove down the village street they met a covered motor lorry.

"Is that the van?" Lord Louis asked.

"Yes," said Palliser.

Lord Louis addressed the driver. "Will you load up and be ready to start by five in the morning?" he ordered.

"Very good, sir," said the man.

"Thanks," said Lord Louis, and started his car again. "By leaving at five, Mr. Palliser, we should be at Bristol in time for a late lunch. You have a room at the Inn, I suppose?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And a parlour too, maybe?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good! I will share both with you. Your title will make it easy to persuade the landlord to put up an extra bed. By the way, I have no intention of destroying the illusion you have created amongst these simple folks, so I beg you to sacrifice none of the manner which, I understand, you have patterned from me."

Together they entered the Inn and the private parlour beyond the bar.

"If you will sit away from the door," said Lord Louis, "I will ask you to excuse me while I write a letter. Have one of these cigarettes? I am assured Lord Louis smokes no other."

The letter he wrote was addressed to Mr. Russell Yorke, and contained some very minute instructions. Inside the envelope he placed a second letter, sealed down, but addressed to no one.

"The last post for the first delivery at Bristol leaves here at seven, Mr. Palliser. To make quite sure this letter arrives in time we will register it and have it expressed. Will you accompany me as far as the Post Office?"

As they were walking back through the village, Palliser plucked up courage to ask:

"My lord, what are you going to do with me?"

Lord Louis gave his arm a friendly pressure.

"I shall be guardian of your slumbers for one night," he replied. "In the morning you will occupy a seat in my car. We shall follow the furniture van to Bristol, where you, the driver and myself will lunch together at the King's Head. After that, Mr. Palliser, I think it unlikely we shall meet again."

"Did you pay for the imitation set, my lord?" asked Palliser tentatively.

"Alas, yes!" replied Lord Louis. "I fear I have been sorely imposed upon. There is now no hope of recovering the cheque, and I must bear the consequences of my own gullibility with what grace I may."

It may be imagined that to share a bedroom with a nobleman of such integrity as Lord Louis Lewis would have been most gratifying to a person of humble origin; but Palliser has since confessed that the night was the worst he ever spent. It is probable, had Lord Louis shown any disposition to sleep, Palliser would have left him in undivided possession of the room. But Lord Louis did not sleep; he sat up, smoking cigarettes and making the tenderest inquiries whenever his stable companion showed a disposition to move.

Shortly after two, the following day, a furniture van and a two-seater Sheffield Simplex entered the outskirts of Bristol.

Lord Louis drove abreast of the van, and said to the driver:

"We will leave the cars at Curzon's Garage while we have lunch. We are well ahead of time, and you can deliver the furniture at the Duke's during the afternoon."

They entered the garage a few minutes later.

"We shall be back in about an hour," said Lord Louis, to a man in a suit of dungarees. "Give me your arm, Palliser. The King's Head is only a moment's walk."

As they passed through the doors of the hotel the motor lorry they had left at the garage was winding up the hill towards Clifton. Lord Louis' chauffeur was at the wheel and Mr. Russell Yorke sat beside him.

Lord Louis made himself more than charming at

lunch, and fully an hour passed before they made their way back to the garage.

Palliser could not for the life of him fathom what Lord Louis' game had been. There was the van with its contents, in exactly the same position as they had left it. It would have taken a very keen eye to detect any difference between Mr. Higgery's copies and the originals, and Mr. Yorke had paid particular attention to Lord Louis' written instructions with regard to re-loading the van. Even a wisp of straw, which had projected beneath the foot of the chest of drawers, was in exactly the same place after the transposition had taken place as it had been before.

"Good-bye, Mr. Palliser," said Lord Louis, climbing into the driving seat of his Sheffield Simplex. "I trust so much of my society has not proved irksome." He took a sovereign from his pocket, and gave it to the driver of the van, then engaged his gears and was off.

Palliser did not accompany the van to the Duke of Bethincourt's.

He returned home, sat on the bed, and wondered what had happened, or what was going to happen.

Lord Louis met Mr. Yorke in the hall of his house.

"Very nicely done," he applauded.

"It was a happy thought of yours," said Mr. Yorke. "I venture to say I carried it out in the spirit as well as the letter."

"The letter," said Lord Louis, "I trust you placed in a drawer of the tallboys which has gone to his Grace the Duke's."

Mr. Yorke nodded, then pointed to where the genuine set of Queen Anne was lined up in the hall.

"You have won," he said, "and I congratulate you."

"Yes," said Lord Louis, "but after all I have got what I paid for."

The Duke of Bethincourt was standing by a window when the van containing the furniture drew up.

"Don't unload," he said. "I want you to take it round to thirty-seven, The Vale." The driver touched his hat, and started away. "Thank God, it's over!" murmured the Duke.

Mr. Edgar Salmon, of 37, The Vale, cast a roving eye over his new possessions.

"Fine!" he remarked; "Bonza!"

He pulled out the drawers of the writing-table and the tallboys, and in one of the latter he found an envelope. Being addressed to no one, he broke the seal. The letter ran thus:

Dear Bethincourt,—

Dissipation, they say, rots the intelligence. I fancy this must be the case with you, as otherwise you would hardly have attempted to foist upon me a set of reproductions.

The genuine Queen Anne suite is now in my possession, and I return you these excellent imitations, with every expression of contempt for your dishonourable failure.

I urgently suggest that you wind up your affairs in England, and seek a different portion

of the atlas for the exercise of your unique talents.

A refusal to do this will result in having to face the public reproaches for your action.

I shall keep silent for two weeks. This should give you ample time to clear out.

Yours faithfully,

LOUIS LEWIS.

Mr. Salmon thrust the letter into his pocket, grabbed a hat, and rushed round to the Duke's abode.

"You young swine!" he shouted. "So you thought to do the crooked on me, eh?" And he flung the letter on the table.

The Duke of Bethincourt was very white about the lips when he had finished reading.

"How — how did he change the stuff?" he gasped.

"Damn that!" yelled Mr. Salmon. "Where's my three thousand pounds?"

Where indeed! Ask the question of many a fleet-footed race-horse, not fleet-footed enough. Dredge for the answer at the bottom of those particular channels where high-spirited young men are apt to launch their flotillas of bank-notes. The money was gone, but being a business man, Mr. Salmon salvaged Lord Louis' cheque from the wreckage, and stuck to the imitation set, which thereby cost him a thousand pounds, for all it was made for a hundred.

Having received no letter from the Duke of Bethincourt, Simon Caleb presented himself at the house in the Avenue the following afternoon. All the blinds

were down, and there were three cabs laden with servants' luggage at the door.

"Where is the Duke?" he asked of a lady who had once been the cook.

"Went abroad this mornin', all in a hurry," she replied.

That was all the information he could obtain. No address — nothing!

People who saw him returning from the Avenue thought the poor old man was quite mad.

Palliser lay low for a week, then curiosity and avarice got the upper hand of his discretion.

Simon Caleb looked up with an awful expression as he entered the shop.

"Simon," said Palliser, "what about my little commission on that Bethincourt deal?"

The Famille Verte jar which Simon Caleb threw caught Mr. Palliser full on the side of the head.

The local newspapers, commenting on the wedding of Lord Louis Lewis to Miss Jill Marston, observed that the bride's distinguished relative, the Duke of Bethincourt, was not present. He had gone abroad for an indefinite period.

Among the beautiful wedding gifts, they said, was a Queen Anne bedroom suite, at one time the property of that sovereign herself, from the bridegroom to the bride.

THE END

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